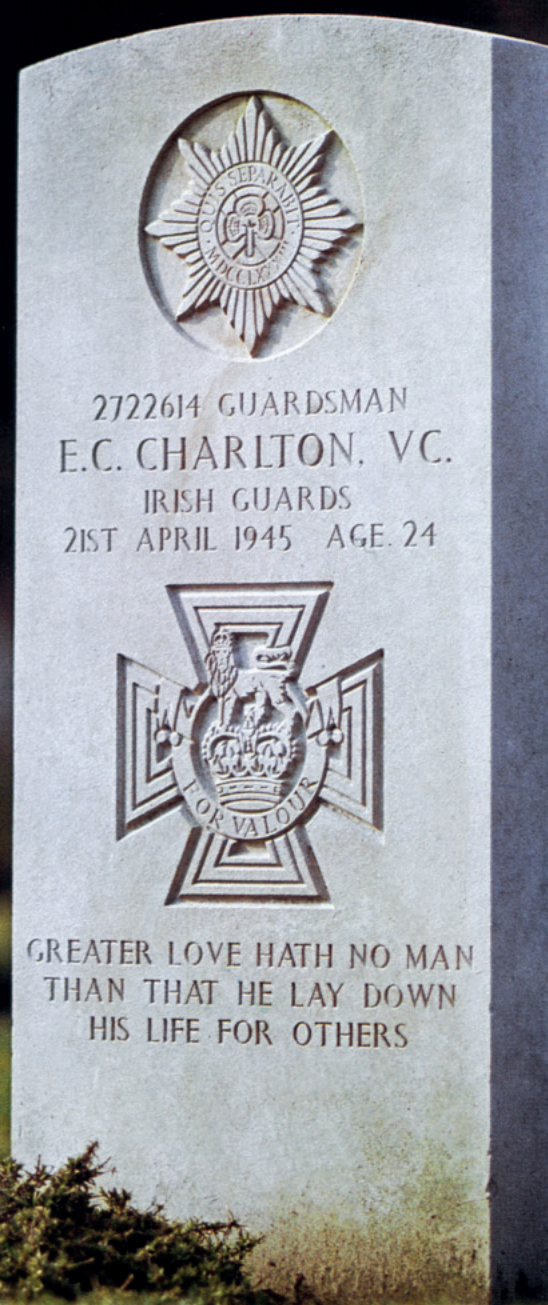


AFTER THE BATTLE



2722614 GUARDSMAN
E.C. CHARLTON, VC.
IRISH GUARDS
21ST APRIL 1945 AGE 24



GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN
THAN THAT HE LAY DOWN
HIS LIFE FOR OTHERS

**EUROPE'S LAST VC
INCIDENT AT IMBER
THE ASCQ MASSACRE**

Number 49

AFTER THE BATTLE

NUMBER 49

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Front Cover: The grave of Guardsman Edward
Charlton, awarded the last Victoria Cross in
Europe, lies in Becklingen War Cemetery near
Soltan in north-west Germany.

Centre Pages: Beside the main line between
Brussels and northern France, passed by dozens
of trains every day, this memorial, erected on the
actual spot, records the deaths of 80 people from
Ascq murdered by men of the SS-Panzer-
Aufklärungs-Abteilung 12 on the night of April
1/2, 1944.

Back Cover: Lonely grave to six airmen in the
remotest corner of Scotland: the memorial on
Ben More Assynt as it was before renovation by
air cadets from No. 2489 (Bridge of Don)
Squadron in June 1985. (David J. Smith)

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Jean-Marie Mocq, author of *Ascq 1944 — La
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research for The Ascq Massacre and to Bernard
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Amongst the many medals and military
souvenirs donated to the Irish Guards Regi-
mental Headquarters at Wellington Barracks
in London is a Victoria Cross, together with
campaign medals, awarded to Guardsman
Edward Colquhoun Charlton. The importance
of this award is that it was the last VC
awarded in Europe during the Second World
War, the action taking place on April 21, 1945
at Wistedt, between Bremen and Hamburg in
northern Germany.

Eddie Charlton was born at 11 Cowen
Terrace, Rowlands Gill, in County Durham
on June 15, 1920, the son of Albert and Edith
Charlton. Together with his two brothers,
John (the eldest) and Alwyn (the youngest),
the family moved to 12 Basford Road, Old
Trafford, Manchester in August 1935, Eddie
attending Seymour Park Primary School,
Stretford, and later, Old Trafford Secondary
Boys' School.

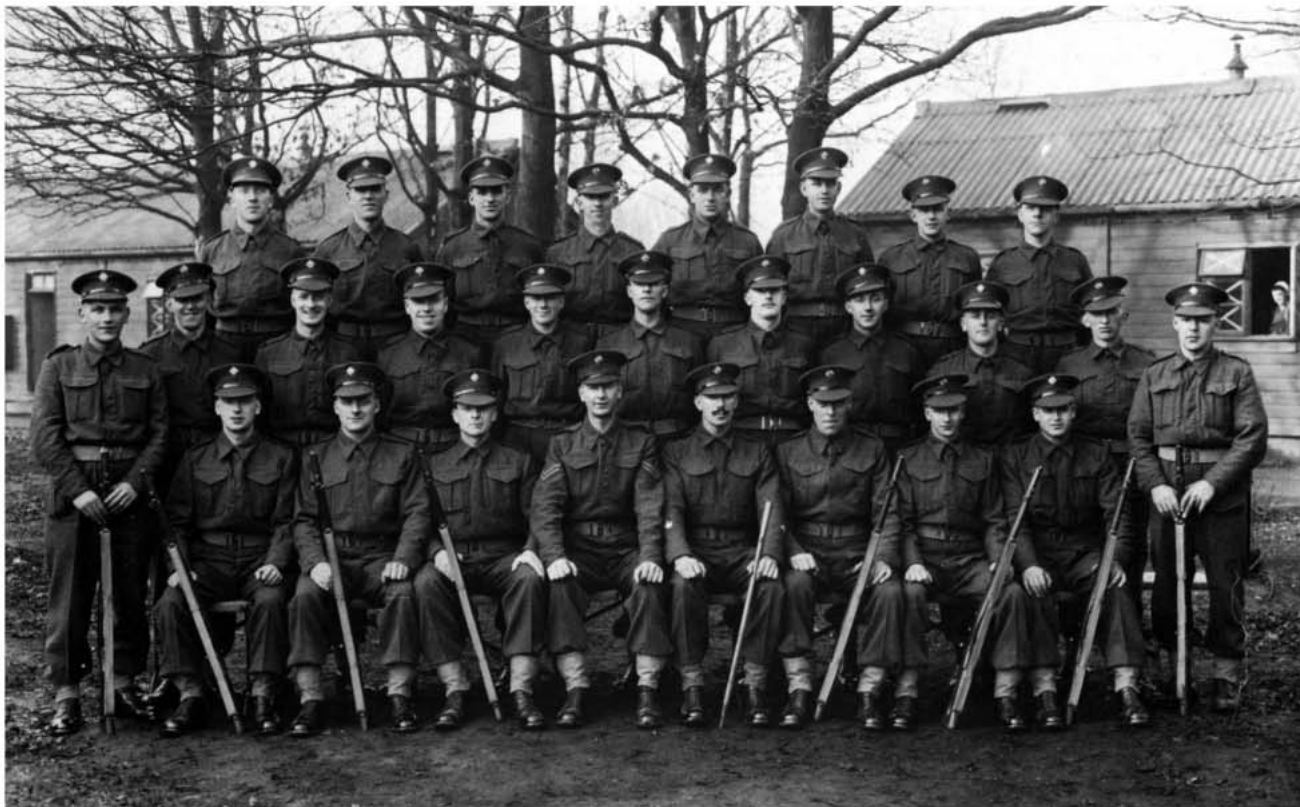
After leaving school in 1934, he worked in
the Manchester abattoir, most members of the
family being involved in the butchering trade
(his father was an inspector of meat and food
for the Manchester Corporation). As soon as
war broke out, Eddie Charlton, 5ft 10½,
volunteered to enlist in the Guards as he
wished to join the police force after the war,
and at that time the Manchester and Salford



Eddie Charlton — to his family he was
simply Ed — aged 10-12.



Old Trafford Secondary Boys' School (now Old Trafford Junior School).



EUROPE'S LAST VC

forces only recruited ex-Guardsmen. He was, in fact, told that he would have to go to the Royal Army Service Corps as a butcher, and therefore decided to wait for his call up to the Irish Guards. His deemed date of enlistment was September 19, 1940 and his initial training was carried out at the Guards' depot at Caterham, under the watchful eye of Corporal Harold Riley, in whose squad he was placed.

In 1942, Charlton joined the 2nd (Armoured) Battalion, Irish Guards, where he met James Mendes, who was to remain a particular friend, and was witness to the action at Wistedt three years later. In an article in *John Bull* magazine, dated June 8, 1946, Mendes testified that 'Ed's regiment was the biggest thing in his life'. In one of several letters written home by Eddie (kindly made available to us by his younger brother), he affirms that 'already the guards out in North Africa are adding more honour and glory to our name and they will go on doing so. Why we have been kept back so long I don't know but our day is coming'.

Eventually his day did come, and a few months after D-Day Eddie Charlton was sent with another draft from his regiment to reinforce the Guards Armoured Division on its drive into Germany. As they passed through the newly liberated countries of Belgium and Holland, Eddie's letters home spoke of the undying gratitude of the civilians and the terrible privations and sufferings inflicted upon them by the German occupation. As the division moved forwards into Germany itself, the attitude of the civilians changed dramatically to one of hate, billets having to be forcibly requisitioned — it being considered safer to chose houses which civilians were still occupying, rather than to use empty properties — thus minimising the risk of booby traps.

Squad group, Caterham Guards' Depot, December 1940. Rear: Guardsmen J. Carney, P. Bursford, T. Powell, W. Mackereth, J. Williams, J. Townley, S. Tweedale, J. Baron. Centre: Guardsmen R. Lowe, E. Rawson, A. Rushton, A. Jones, H. Critchley, Td.S. T. O'Connor, Guardsmen G. Chadwick, E. Charlton, G. Moore, W. Hartley, W. Stoney. Front: Guardsmen E. Mallett, J. McKnight, J. Hill, Corporal H. Riley, the squad instructor, PSM J. Gaffney, Guardsmen R. McKee, F. Spence and J. Lynch.



Family group, Basford Road, Old Trafford, 1941/42. Albert and Edith Charlton with their three boys: Alwyn, the youngest, in the Army Cadet Force; Eddie, Irish Guards, and John, the eldest, with the Royal Air Force.



The original of this picture, or its precise caption, can no longer be traced but it shows the 2nd Battalion somewhere in Germany and Alwyn Charlton is almost certain that the crewman on the left is his brother.

Soon, the Guards moved into the heart of the Reich, Eddie having joined No. 1 Squadron as a Sherman co-driver. The Irish Guards (part of the Guards Armoured Division) was given the objective of cutting the autobahn between Bremen and Hamburg to prevent it being used for the movement of German troops. On April 20, Major (now Brigadier) Michael O'Cock, the commander of No. 1 Squadron, cleared the autobahn between Sittensen and Elsdorf, leaving the road open to the north. As evening approached, he sent one troop north-west from Elsdorf to the village of Wistedt, but this had to be called back as it was stretching the squadron too far, the approaching darkness increasing the problem of the isolated unit. (Each troop consisted of three 75mm gun Shermans and one Firefly Sherman mounting the formidable 17-pounder gun. The increase in size of the breech of the gun, coupled with additional ammunition space, meant that there was no space for a co-driver/machine gunner on Fireflies. Normally the Troop Corporal, or Lance Sergeant as he is known in the Guards, commanded the Firefly).

The following morning (April 21) before dawn, after a fairly quiet night, a troop of No. 1 Squadron commanded by Lieutenant Barry Quinan (the other tank commanders being Sergeant Jim Connolly, Sergeant Hughie Gallagher and Lance Corporal Reg Unwin) was ordered to re-occupy Wistedt which lay some two miles up the road. They were to be accompanied by a platoon of infantry from the 3rd Battalion under Lieutenant (now Colonel) William Harvey-Kelly: 'We were told no opposition was expected and that the Grenadier Group would be bypassing Wistedt in the direction of Zeven. Our general impression was that this was a temporary occupation in the role of an outpost or standing patrol.'

The daily summary by the Intelligence Officer, Captain Eamonn Fitzgerald, takes up the story:

'As this troop came out of its old position [in Elsdorf] the Hun occupied it and Mick O'Cock found quite a number occupying the southern part of the village. And at about the same time No. 3 Squadron under Paddy Pole-Carew approached the village along the autobahn. Knowing that there were only infantry around, Paddy came straight on and was shot at with a panzerfaust. Fortunately the shot glanced off and did no damage. Between the two Squadrons the Kraut was soon eliminated. We were not to have peace for long though. Ten minutes later No. 1 Squadron reported a self-propelled gun approaching from the west down a lane. Before we could take any action though it had brewed up a

could move without exposing itself to the gun. So Paddy sent up [Lieutenant] Neil Whitfield-Edwards [commanding a Troop of No. 3 Squadron] along the autobahn to see if he could get a shoot from the flank. This proved easy enough and from the flank he could see not only the self-propelled gun already spotted but two others as well. He opened fire. It was an unlucky day for the Battalion — visibility was bad owing to a light drizzle, and instead of a fair sized bag we did not get a single one. The self-propelled guns withdrew, and as they went two more came out of their hiding places and pulled back. As soon as they were out of danger they all turned and gave us a very unpleasant hour or so. We had no more attacks on this sector for the rest of the day, due partly to the formidable "stonk" Chris Vesey (our Battery Commander) put down on the area.'

Meanwhile the four Shermans of Lieutenant Quinan's troop, accompanied by Lieutenant Harvey-Kelly's platoon riding on the backs of the tanks, were proceeding on the two-mile drive to Wistedt. 'I let Sergeant Gallagher, one of my tank commanders lead', recalls Barry Quinan. 'He was an experienced and spirited NCO with a Military Medal.'

'Apart from trees lining each side of the road, the ground was mainly open, with a few copses, until we reached the wooded village. This was a scatter of farm buildings each side

carrier belonging to the 3rd Battalion. Both Squadrons manoeuvred for fire positions. No. 1 Squadron found itself pinned — no tank



'The flyover over the Bremen-Hamburg autobahn from which we watched the panzer grenadiers forming up the evening before.' Picture from Captain (now Colonel) Stephen Langton, 21/c to Major O'Cock.



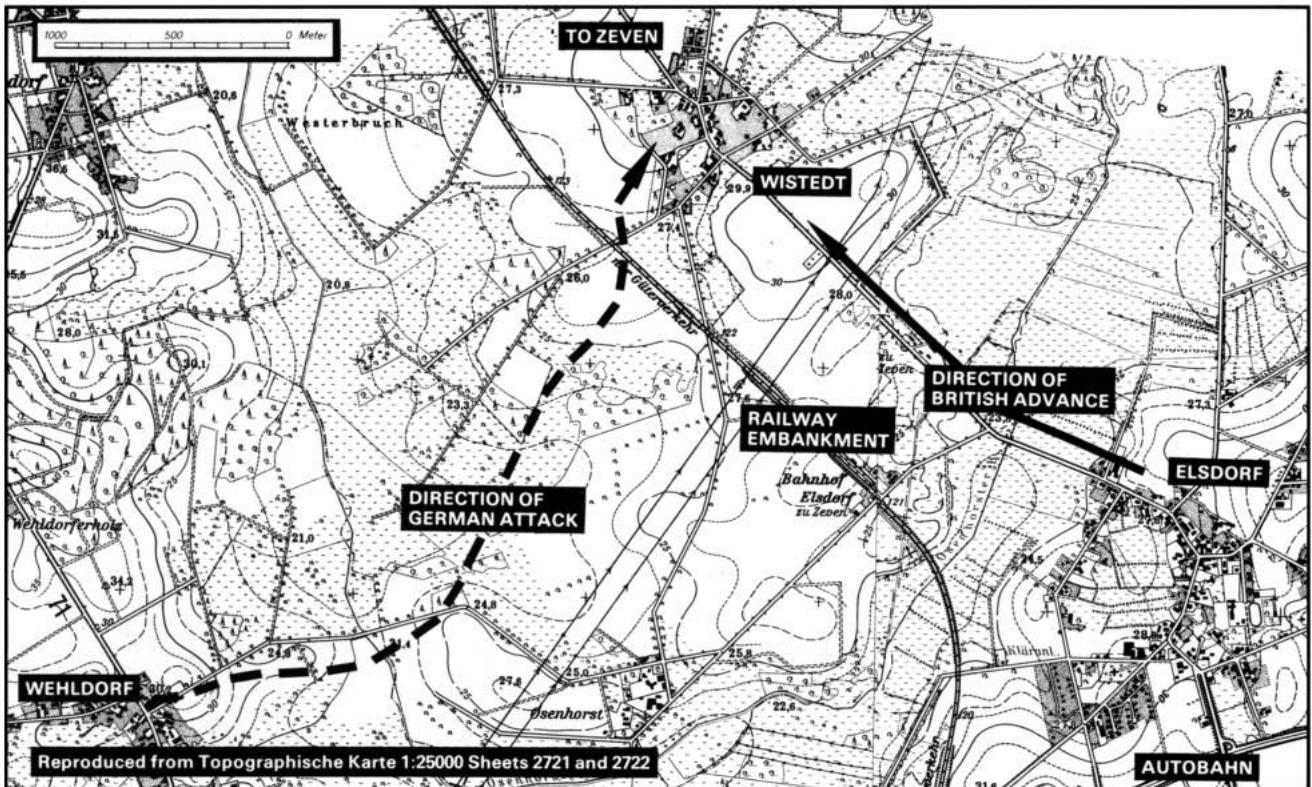
We found the bridge on the southern outskirts of Elsdorf.



of the road for perhaps 400 yards or more. At the time I thought it too large an area for effective defence by four Shermans and one platoon — even of guardsmen!

Behind my tank came Sergeant Connolly who had seen a lot of action. The Firefly was commanded by Lance Corporal Unwin. As we reached Wistedt, the road curved left and Sergeant Gallagher fired a high explosive shell ahead, in case of opposition. At the same time, I switched on the tank commander's overriding switch for the turret power-traverse. Immediately there was a total short-circuit of all electrical equipment; even the engine stopped, leaving me stuck in the middle of the road! I have never been clever with electricity and this, emphatically, was not the time to begin learning. Accordingly, I transferred to Sergeant Connolly's tank, at the same time specifically instructing that Guardsman Charlton, the co-driver in my original tank, should dismount his Browning hull gun so that if the crew were unable to get the electrics working again, he could at least

Above: The Elsdorf road as it enters Wistedt. It was just round the bend that Captain Quinan's Sherman broke down outside the gateway to the Fricke farm below.





At the far end of the village William Harvey-Kelly stands on the same spot as he did on April 21, 1945 when the shell blew the beret from Captain Quinan's head.

gun carrier followed by a lorry with more troops under a canopy that exactly duplicated the shape of a Sherman tank turret. 'I thought at the time it was our men marching in a bunch of prisoners — quite a familiar sight by that stage of the war.'

Barry Quinan: 'Some time after dawn I came under fire from perhaps two platoons of infantry with mortar or shell support and a couple of self-propelled guns, attempting to advance down the road into Wistedt from straight ahead. We had hardly fired a round from the turret Browning when it became clear that the barrel was defective and tracers could be seen spraying uselessly in all directions. (At that particular date, I believe the trouble was not very uncommon: perhaps a faulty batch?) The co-driver, Guardsman Mendes, was out of the tank at the time, so I could not get the hull gun to have it set up in the turret even if time had been available. Accordingly I halted the enemy advance with HE shells fired mainly into the branches of the trees overshadowing the ditches along which their infantry were crawling, giving a shrapnel burst effect. I also attempted to hit the SP guns. Although the tactic worked, ammunition began to run low and I told Guardsman Mendes (crouching beside the tank) to bring up the Firefly: needless to say the 'B' radio set



The carpenter's shop, into which Guardsman Mendes backed the Firefly, stood just beside this house. Our party, British and German, compare experiences at the place where it happened forty years previously.

support the accompanying 3rd Battalion infantry section. At the far end of Wistedt, Sergeant Gallagher took position in the trees on the left of the road, so I took the right side. There was clear level ground ahead for around half a mile, though there were copses on the left and right. The road continued lined with tall trees on each side. It drizzled.'

William Harvey-Kelly remembers that 'the Platoon/Troop Group reached Wistedt at first light and Barry and myself decided to site a section and tank on each of the roads leading into Wistedt — Platoon/Troop HQ taking the Zeven road, but because of the houses and trees the section/tanks were not mutually supporting. After siting our own HQ, Barry and I visited the other section/tanks. We were brewing up for breakfast when we heard the noise of vehicles in the direction of Zeven. A vehicle was approaching on the tree-lined road in front of us. Barry Quinan stood in the middle of the road to get a better view and focused his binoculars on it. "I wonder if it's the Grenadiers", he said to me; the next moment a solid armour-piercing shell passed so close to his head that it blew his beret off, and hit the house behind. Then, to use a cliché — all hell was let loose.'

Captain Quinan recalls that through the drizzle infantry appeared to be leading a Bren





was not working! Unfortunately as Corporal Unwin came round the corner, along the road, a shot from one of the SP guns killed him and he fell back into the tank. At this, the crew baled out. Guardsman Mendes, the co-driver, took charge and, encouraging the crew to remount, reversed the Firefly back down the road. Mendes then remained acting as tank commander.

'When my HE ammunition was exhausted I also attempted to reverse, but the right-hand track broke the wooden cover of a well and, with trees ahead of me, I was truly stuck! We therefore baled out and rendezvoused with William Harvey-Kelly by the Firefly. While there, it became clear that Sergeant Gallagher and the supporting 3rd Battalion infantry were under heavy attack from the left flank. Sergeant Connolly came up on foot from my original tank to report that it had not been possible to cure the electrical failure. I cannot now recall whether he said anything specific about being attacked, but I certainly ordered him to return at once to the dismounted tank crew (including Charlton, of course).

'I had thought to take over the Firefly from Guardsman Mendes, but I observed that the rear end was embedded in a house which by now was on fire from mortar or shelling attack. I called up Major O'Cock and requested permission for survivors to break out of Wistedt if possible. This was approved. I had been supported by Harvey-Kelly in making the request. Together we gathered about half our original strength and struck off cross-country away to the right, going in bounds from copse to copse. At this stage Guardsman Mendes had collected a Bren gun and on his own initiative formed part of the rearguard covering the withdrawal.'

William Harvey-Kelly confirms that 'finally a message came through to withdraw. By this time we were all but encircled and the only route available was through the woods to our right. We were unable to contact any of the other sections and tanks (in fact, by that time they had all been overrun).'

Sergeant Connolly was one of the last of the troop to see Charlton alive: 'About half-an-hour after daylight I was making a quick reconnaissance on foot together with Guardsman Allan to see what was in our rear behind the houses and also at the top of the village. It was too quiet to be true but I now believe we had driven into an ambush. The noise of tanks or any track-laying vehicle — the grinding rattle of the tracks — could always be heard for a considerable distance, acting almost as a direction finder to any enemy force in the area. In this case I think the Germans monitored our movements while lying low to create a surprise attack.

'I was about 80 yards away from the tank when the Germans opened up,' continues Connolly. 'We were caught in the open and dropped face down. The Germans attacked with frontal machine gun fire and mortars from the right flank. I think this could have been to draw the Sherman's fire to the right to leave the left flank weak. I heard a Browning

Colonel Harvey-Kelly (then Lieutenant) rediscovers the route they took when they withdrew from the village through the woods on the eastern side of Wistedt.

machine gun open up on the turret of the tank manned by Charlton who stopped a troop-carrying half-track, putting the Germans to ground on the left flank. Charlton's action

was carried out leaving himself with head and shoulders exposed above the turret ring in defiance of the enemy return fire — this alone a brave act.



Sergeant Jim Connolly found the spot where the mortar bomb had exploded beside him. This shed showed evidence of the blast with a fragment from the nose fuse still embedded in the woodwork.



Jim managed to reach this house — that of Herr Fricke's uncle.



Soldiers and civilians took cover in the cellar, now sub-divided by the new wall on the left. Heinrich Fricke points out where the wounded man lay on the table.

'We now came under fire, mostly from the right flank, I seem to recall from panzerfausts and mortars. By now the machine gun had stopped firing — I would say that having used up the full belt of ammo, and under close-quarter fire, it would have been impossible to reload without the operator being shot to pieces. The next thing I remember was the brief appearance of Lance Corporal Dick Sawtell from the tank shouting "Eddie!" who had dismounted the gun and had raced to a wing wall dividing two houses. I think Sawtell must have been hit as he threw his arms upwards and seemed to drop back into the

tank. This was the last I ever saw of Charlton or Sawtell.

'I now realised I was in a desperate situation' continues Connolly, 'and decided to make a dash for it to the houses between the firing. I could hear German voices shouting. Another three or four of my troop had dismounted and, sort of crouching and running, made for the nearest house. I managed to get to the house next door and I was crawling along to get a better view of the attack when a mortar bomb exploded and I caught a fair amount of the blast in my face.

'From the rear of the house I managed to

crawl to join the others. I then went to a very small window in the back kitchen and peering through I could see about 400 yards to where Germans were advancing on us. We had been surrounded. As the usual procedure in warfare on entering any building is either to throw in a grenade or fire a burst of automatic fire we decided to take shelter in the cellar. Sure enough we had a burst of MG fire through the ground floor windows. The next thing was a soldier on the cellar stairs with a stick grenade in his right hand ready in throwing position. In order to save our lives I stepped forward, hands raised. We were then taken out of the rear of the houses and marched roughly 600-800 yards to a barn where a German officer, speaking perfect English, told us where we were being taken and warned us that if we valued our lives we should do as we were told. He then remarked that whoever it was on the left flank firing at them, he was a very brave soldier indeed.'



Rather than risk a grenade, Jim Connolly stepped forward to surrender. One panzergrenadier came down the stairs and lit a candle. Exactly forty years later Jim meets the same grenadier, Helmut Hoffmann, now the owner of a small machine factory in Varel in north-west Germany.





By contrast, the war diary description of these events is somewhat bland and less informative:

'This was only the beginning of our troubles: Barry Quinan was soon in trouble. The enemy had worked around Wistedt and had entered in from the south, overrunning one of our infantry sections. This was soon dealt with and then the attack really started: self-propelled guns supported by infantry advanced on the village from the north. The troop and platoon although reinforced by another troop (James Osborne) found them-

One of the two Shermans from Lieutenant Osborne's reinforcing troop which were knocked out on the approach to Wistedt. The road to Elsdorf in the background. The tank was removed about 1948 but photographed by Colonel Langton in 1945.

selves practically surrounded. Two tanks were knocked out, one bogged and Barry Quinan's own ran out of ammunition — the troop very wisely decided to pull out. The survivors managed to get back to the shelter of a house and when the enemy started to attack that they broke out and made their way back to Battalion HQ at Elsdorf. James Osborne meanwhile had been having the same kind of

treatment and was given the order to disengage. He lost two of his tanks but managed to get back with his own. The rest of the day was uneventful — Elsdorf was shelled on and off all day but did little damage to our people. Battalion HQ pulled back to Ruspel. Just before dark several planes made a hit and run raid on Elsdorf and dropped several heavy bombs. We had no casualties.'





Leutnant Hans-Jürgen von Bülow, the company commander in the successful attack on Wistedt for which he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class.

The reason that Guardsman Charlton is not mentioned in the war diary account is that apart from the Troop Commander, Lieutenant Quinan, all the tank commanders had either been captured (Sergeants Connolly and Gallagher) or killed (Corporal Unwin). (Unwin's shallow grave was later discovered by Major O'Cock and Captain Langton, his second in command.) Most other witnesses close to the site of Charlton's action were also captured. Sergeant Connolly recalls that the Germans who made them prisoner were sailors who had been based on the Kiel Canal, and that they were then marched away on foot under a single armed guard to the PoW cage at Westertimke, about seven miles west of Wistedt. Those guardsmen that returned had been, in the main, in action at the other end of the village, or were from Lieutenant Osborne's reinforcing force, and were thus not in a position to have seen much.

The first indications of the full extent of Charlton's bravery only came to light when several of the guardsmen taken prisoner by the Germans were released from the Marlag und Milag Nord PoW camp at Westertimke a few days later on April 28. Guardsman Mendes had himself been awarded a 'Red Star' Distinguished Conduct Medal (a Red

Star annotation to a recommendation indicating that the medal should be immediately awarded) for his leadership and determination in the battle on the recommendation of Lieutenant Quinan. Charlton's name had been put forward for the immediate award of a Military Medal.

After the British forces withdrew, elements of the Panzer-Grenadier-Regiment 115 (of the 15. Panzer-Grenadier-Division) occupied the village. Leutnant (now Dr) Hans Jürgen von Bülow, the officer commanding 6. Kompanie of II. Bataillon, throws additional light on the day's events:

'I woke up at 0500 on April 21, 1945. My company was supposed to be in Wehldorf [about two miles south-west of Wistedt] by now Battalion HQ.

'It was raining and we were suffering a hangover from the previous night in Zeven. We were transported to Wehldorf in two open trailers towed by a tractor. There the CO, Major Weichsel, gave me my orders which were to eject an enemy tank unit out of Wistedt and told me that I would receive three assault guns [almost certainly Sturmgeschütze StuG IV/75mm]. These were waiting outside so, after a conference with the platoon commanders, I distributed the men (in all about 60 plus officers) between the three AFVs with myself aboard the leading one.

'We set off in pouring rain. We soon turned off left onto a track through the fields. Then we attempted to cross a wooden bridge but it could not take the weight. We dismounted and I ordered the company to advance,



Now retired — Dr H. Jürgen von Bülow.

leaving the armour behind at the bridge. (I reported this to Battalion HQ.) We were about 250 metres from the Zeven-Rotenburg railway embankment surrounded by swampy meadows.

'Soon the adjutant appeared and demanded to know why I had not attacked. He agreed with me that it was suicidal to attack the British tanks with only a few machine guns and panzerfäuste, but said that the CO insisted that the attack proceed.

'After a briefing with my platoon commanders I ordered the 1st Platoon to move a few hundred metres along the railway towards Zeven to mount a left-flank manoeuvre and approach Wistedt from the north-east in a wide swing to draw the enemy fire. Meanwhile the other two platoons were to advance across

the meadow and not to fire until fired upon but to create the impression of a big attack.

'We waited about forty-five minutes before we heard the firing from the 1st Platoon. We then advanced at the double as silently as possible and reached the bushes at the edge of the village. I prayed to God to look after my men. Then I gave the signal for the final attack but after only about twenty metres some idiot yelled "Hurra!" and the rest joined in. I had the impression we had achieved surprise as we reached the centre of the village and that only a few of the tank crews had succeeded in reaching their tanks. *One enemy machine gun belaboured us with endless succession.* [Editor's italics]

'One or two tanks were seemingly firing "Brand" ammunition and in minutes the

place was alight. We could hardly see for the smoke but our panzerfäuste hit the tanks. Oberfeldwebel Brackert, a hell of a fellow from East Prussia, just missed a tank with his panzerfäust and in anger climbed on the tank and kicked the turret with his boot shouting: "Herauskomme!" — "Come out!" The crew emerged with arms up.'

(When questioned about this incident Captain Quinan told us that he thought this could only have been Sergeant Gallagher's Sherman although, knowing the men involved, he found it hard to believe that they emerged without offering any resistance.)

Leutnant von Bülow continues his account: 'The machine gun stopped firing and Tommies appeared from all sides with their hands up. We took about 6 to 8 prisoners and





A day to be proud of yet overshadowed by sadness — investiture at the Palace for the posthumous award of the highest decoration a country can bestow for gallantry in the field. Another tragedy was to strike the Charlton family after the war when John died as the result of a crash in the RAF. Mum and Dad have since passed away; Alwyn (below) came with us to Wistedt.



a sergeant even congratulated us for having done well. We disarmed the prisoners and they showed us how to operate their machine guns [Brens]. They offered us cigarettes. We had no men killed and only three slightly wounded.'

(Captain Quinan comments that this figure cannot include the unit approaching down the Zeven road. He had them in full view for about twenty minutes as they tried to crawl up the ditches on either side of the road during

which time, he said, he fired at least 40-50 HE shells plus a few AP shells at the SP gun. Some HE was fired to explode in the trees, some twenty feet up, and other shells direct at groups of men. The gunner was very accurate and in particular scored a direct hit on a fallen tree behind which three men were crouching. Barry Quinan feels that they at least must have sustained more than a slight headache!)

'We then took the rations from the tanks and withdrew from the centre of Wistedt to

avoid the enemy artillery and mortar fire', recalls Leutnant von Bülow 'I set up my company CP in a house (see picture previous pages) in which the Tommies had left their food on the table which we enjoyed. Someone found a gramophone and repeatedly played *Im Rosengarten von Sanssouci*.

'The rain stopped and the sun came out. Two of my men checked the tanks but one was wounded by artillery fire. In the evening I moved my CP into the teacher's house. The



'I am writing this letter to you with reference to your son Eddie. Today I am one of the happiest men in England after I had seen in the paper of his reward, the VC. It was only through his gallantry that saved my life that I am able to write this to you. The work he did that day is indescribable, he saved quite a lot of our lives although badly wounded. You asked me to tell you all that happened that day but I'm afraid I couldn't do it. You must forgive me for that but if the same had happened to me I

would not like anybody to describe it to my mother . . . I was the last person with him. He was taken prisoner . . . but unfortunately he was badly wounded and I very slightly and we were both taken to the same German aid post. He was in great spirit all the time but not allowed to be taken to the prison camp with me so with his old saying "up the Micks" we parted company.' Letter written in May 1946 to Mrs Charlton from Sergeant Hughie Gallagher who died in 1981.



Eddie's name heads the Roll of Honour on the tablet unveiled at his former place of work, the Manchester Abattoir. The honour of performing the ceremony was given to Mr H. Wilcox, one



of his workmates. When the abattoir was relocated to a new site some four miles away in Phillips Park Road, the memorial was dismantled and re-erected in the new building.

company was dug in all around us and two more companies joined us but all was quiet. On the 22nd we received a few shells but no one was hit. The 23rd was my birthday and I was ordered to report to Battalion HQ. My CO congratulated me on the Wistedt action and awarded me the Iron Cross, First Class.

'On the 24th we received considerable artillery and mortar fire and in the evening withdrew to Brüttendorf.'

Amongst the prisoners taken was the grievously wounded Charlton who, together with Sergeant Hugh Gallagher, was taken to a nearby temporary German aid post where, despite medical attention, he died soon afterwards. Confirmation of his death came when his grave was discovered after the war. (The records state that this was at Bremerhaven — some 35 miles north-west of Wistedt — but it seems more likely that it was at Bremervorde which lies 15 miles away. Unfortunately a search of local cemetery records has failed to prove this either way.)

When Sergeant Connolly was released from the PoW camp he remembers that he reported Charlton's action to a staff liaison officer. Connolly repeated what the German officer had told him after his capture, asking if this could be passed on to his immediate superior. When Sergeant Connolly arrived back in the UK he again informed the OC of the depot at Tring, Hertfordshire, of Charlton's deed, repeating it to Captain Parker at No. 9 RAOC Company in Thetford. In a letter to the Editor forty years after the event, Jim Connolly explained that 'very soon afterwards I was demobbed as I was a time-expired serviceman but if it had not been for Charlton's action in repelling the attack on his own initiative there would not have been any survivors'.

One of the conditions for the award of the Victoria Cross is that the action has to be witnessed by at least two other individuals and, together with the evidence from Sergeant Connolly, proof of his exploit was also furnished by accounts taken from German prisoners-of-war who spoke of a lone guardsman who stood in front of three burning Shermans and held up a battalion of their men, buying time for his own chums to reorganise themselves. When the true nature of Charlton's bravery was known, the recommendation for an award was upgraded to a Victoria Cross. On May 10 the request for the

award of the Military Medal was marked 'unsuccessful', in fact this was inevitable once it was known that Charlton was dead as the MM could not be given posthumously. In the British Army during the Second World War an ordinary private soldier could only be decorated for bravery with the Victoria Cross, Distinguished Conduct Medal, Military Medal or Mentioned in Despatches, and of these only the latter and the VC could be awarded after death. There were many instances where recommendations for the award of the DCM or MM were made but which could not be confirmed because the soldier had died before the King's approval had been given.

(Following the introduction of the Queen's Gallantry Medal in 1974, primarily a decoration for civilians, which could be awarded posthumously, in 1979 the Ministry of Defence, with the Sovereign's approval, changed the 'rules' governing all military awards for bravery, except the Distinguished Service Order, to bring them in line so as to permit their award to be made in circumstances in which the recipient had died. The DSO had to be excluded as one has to be alive to be a member of an Order.)

Early in 1946 Eddie's remains were exhumed by the Army Graves Registration Service and temporarily reburied at Rhade, quite close to where the action had taken



As the dedication ceremony of the Household Brigade War Memorial drew to its close on May 28, 1956, Mrs Charlton, accompanied by her husband, son and daughter-in-law, walked the few yards to the regimental headquarters in Wellington Barracks. There, after having been received by the Lieutenant-Colonel Commanding the Irish Guards, Colonel P. F. I. Reid, she presented him with Edward's Victoria Cross — the first ever VC given to the Regiment — for safe keeping and as a perpetual reminder of his supreme sacrifice.



Those that came through — No. 1 Squadron one week after the war. One of those was Guardsman James Mendes, whose tribute to Eddie Charlton appeared in 'John Bull' in June 1946:

'There is a man who will march with me on the Victory Day parade, a man you will not see. He will not be photographed by the cameras that record the great parade, twelve thousand strong, of men and women who made victorious war by land, sea and air. He will not hear the roaring of the mechanized columns, the steadily marching feet, the overhead drone as the RAF flies past. Not for him the slow-rolling cheers of the crowds, the sharp words of command, the music and the flags. He is just one of the greater invisible host that will be on parade that day. The men who never came back, the fellows who had the bad luck, the marchers who ought to be there. And *are* there, in the hearts of those who fought alongside them. For I shall see him all right. Not dressed for a ceremonial parade, clean-shaven, bright as to boots, meticulously clothed. I shall see him as he fell — tackling a battalion of Panzer Grenadiers on his own. . . .

'Ed was my pal. Funny that an Englishman should have to win the VC for an Irish regiment, but that's the way it is. Yet after five years in the Irish Guards Ed was more Irish than English, in fact, more Irish than many of us. He had the blarney

place. A location for a permanent British military cemetery had already been selected south of Soltau near Becklingen and in February that year he was interred in Grave No. 13 of Row F in Plot 7. Close by lay the mortal remains of another VC holder, Captain Ian Liddell, Coldstream Guards, of the Guards Armoured Division.

The announcement of the award of the Victoria Cross to Guardsman Charlton came in a final wartime honours list published in the *London Gazette* on May 2, 1946. On October 29 that year his parents attended a moving investiture at Buckingham Palace at which HM King George VI presented them with the decoration for an exploit which had cost their son his life. In the words of the official citation:

'On the morning of 21st April 1945, Guardsman Charlton was co-driver in one tank of a troop, which, with a platoon of infantry seized the village of Wistedt.

'Shortly afterwards, the enemy attacked this position under cover of an artillery concentration and in great strength, comprising as it later transpired, a battalion of the 15th Panzer Grenadiers, supported by six self-propelled guns.

'All the tanks, including Guardsman Charlton's, were hit; the infantry were hard pressed and in danger of being over-run.

'Thereupon, entirely on his own initiative, Guardsman Charlton decided to counter attack the enemy. Quickly recovering the Browning from his damaged tank, he advanced up the road in full view of the enemy, firing the Browning from his hip.

'Such was the boldness of his attack and the intensity of his fire that he halted the leading enemy company, inflicting heavy casualties on

all right, and the temper with a physique to make it dangerous. But he had a heart of gold. He was a man, the way real men are and should be. He liked his beer and his fun. He lived the British way and died the British way.

'That was Ed, who goes down in the ruddy annals of military history for one of the greatest bits of heroism in this war. . . .

'The citation just says he recovered the Browning from his damaged tank. That alone was something. Not only was he in full view of the enemy and in the line of their sights, but his Sherman was *brewing up*. Anybody who knows Shermans will tell you they have nasty habits when they're hit. They burst into flames and the ammo starts popping. It's uncomfortable to be near one, much less on it; the citation just says he recovered the Browning! . . .

'This story might never have been told, had he not made it possible for some of his comrades to come back alive and report it. In Ed's case there were not only his pals, but the enemy, too, who saw to it that he will never be forgotten. Ed died in a German field hospital, and captured Germans told interrogating officers the amazing story of a man who stood in front of three blazing Shermans and help up a battalion of Panzer Grenadiers.

'To me, Ed still lives. He will march with us through London. You won't see him, but he'll be there.'



'Don't worry Mum I don't take any more risks than I have to so I'll come through this lot with flying colours.' Letter from Ed to his parents, 1945.

them. This effort at the same time brought much needed relief to our own infantry.

'For ten minutes Guardsman Charlton fired in this manner, until wounded in the left arm. Immediately, despite intense enemy fire, he mounted his machine gun on a nearby fence which he used to support his wounded left arm. He stood firing thus for a further ten minutes until he was again hit in the left arm, which fell away shattered and useless.

'Although twice wounded and suffering from loss of blood, Guardsman Charlton again lifted his machine gun on to the fence, now having only one arm with which to fire and reload. Nevertheless, he still continued to inflict casualties on the enemy, until finally he was hit for the third time and collapsed. He died later of his wounds, in enemy hands. The heroism and determination of this Guardsman in his self-imposed task were beyond all praise. Even his German captors were amazed at his valour.

'Guardsman Charlton's courageous and self-sacrificing action not only inflicted extremely heavy casualties on the enemy and retrieved his comrades from a desperate situation, but also enabled the position to be speedily recaptured.'

Then, on May 28, 1956, on the occasion of the opening and dedication of the Household Brigade War Memorial Cloister at the Guards' Chapel in Birdcage Walk by HM The Queen, Colonel-in-Chief of the Regiment, Mrs Charlton gave the VC to the Irish Guards for its permanent safekeeping. Today it is proudly displayed alongside other regimental trophies, and the five other Victoria Crosses awarded to Irish Guardsmen, the simple inscription almost an epitaph to the brave: the ones that died 'For Valour'.



We timed our return visit to Wistedt to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the battle, and part of our plan was to take Eddie Charlton's younger brother, Alwyn, with us. Advanced research in Germany by John Hillyer had traced a former Panzer-Grenadier-Regiment 115 soldier, Helmut Hoffmann, who had visited the village two years previously. In addition, local civilians were interviewed by John including Herr Heinrich Fricke, beside whose house Barry Quinan's Sherman had broken down. With the positive interest of these German witnesses, we decided to invite three of the British participants in the battle: Barry Quinan and Jim Connolly on the armoured side, and William Harvey-Kelly to represent the infantry. Unfortunately Barry Quinan was unable to be with us but the rest of the party arrived at Wistedt at the home of Herr Fricke early on the morning of April 20 — the eve of the battle.

Herr Fricke proved to have a very reliable and vivid recollection of what had happened — most probably because he was at the impressionable age of 11 at the time. He remembered that the first sign of battle that

The Hemme house. The Sherman was parked in the foreground — the British were inside breakfasting in the kitchen.

morning was tracer fire coming towards the village, whereupon the inhabitants took shelter in their cellars — a feature of most German houses then as now. The Fricke family — mother Maria, son Heinrich and two sisters, Alwine and Marianne — took refuge in their Uncle Gustav's home about a hundred yards away. Altogether there were about 17 civilians cramped in the tiny cellar. Heinrich Fricke has a clear recollection of British soldiers arriving, some carrying a grievously wounded comrade who was laid on a table in the centre of the cellar. He had been badly wounded in the side and all the evidence suggests that this was Eddie Charlton. There were about five British soldiers in all.

After about twenty minutes several Germans appeared, at which point one of the British soldiers (Connolly) stepped forward to

surrender. One grenadier (Helmut Hoffmann) came down the stairs and lit a candle to illuminate the scene, whereupon the Tommies were ordered to remove their packs and come outside. The German medical orderly was called to see what he could do for the wounded man. He had been patched up with a small field dressing but, after removing this and examining the wound, the MO said nothing could be done to save him. Herr Fricke then told us that all the civilians were ordered out, leaving the wounded soldier behind. They found most of the houses in the village on fire and they were forced to flee into the surrounding fields. Unfortunately Helmut Hoffmann could not tell us what happened to the wounded man as his squad was also ordered to leave the village and dig in new positions outside. When the village people returned they

Left: When surprised by the German attack, one man tried to leave the house by the door on the right but a grenadier entering from the entrance at the back shot him as he emerged into the cowshed. Right: Hans Bamann points out the spot where he buried the British soldier.



found two fresh graves: one on the opposite side of the road from the tank outside Herr Fricke's, and a second one near his uncle's house.

Hans Bamann, a soldier on sick leave at his home in Wistedt, another of our local witnesses, then took up the story, explaining that he found a dead British soldier in the doorway of the adjoining cowshed. Gallagher's tank crew had parked their Sherman a few yards away from the house.

Inside either they or some infantry had been surprised by the German attack while having a brew up. The men bailed out through the kitchen window, but one decided instead to dive through another door — the one leading to the cowshed. As he entered the shed a German coming in from the far end cut him down. Herr Bamann buried him near the tank and a few days later was instructed by the local burgermeister to exhume and re-bury the other two men in the village cemetery along-

side the road to Elsdorf. As it was assumed that they would soon be removed by an Allied graves registration team, they were wrapped in ground-sheets and interred beside the crew from an American bomber which had crashed locally.

Herr Fricke told us that all the tanks had been taken away shortly after the war ended except for two Shermans which had fallen foul of mines outside the village — those knocked out from Lieutenant Osborne's reinforcing



Three British graves were located within the village — Herr Bamann transferred the bodies to this corner of Wistedt cemetery.



Herr Fricke was a knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide on our tour of the village. Trees still bore their battle scars and he showed us this Sherman shell-case he had dug up in his front garden. We are presenting it to the Irish Guards museum at Wellington Barracks.

troop. Local children played on them, traversing the turret on one until it was mysteriously blown off one day, both Shermans being photographed by Colonel Langton circa August 1945. They were finally removed around 1948 but for many years nothing would grow on the spots where the tanks had rested.

After talking through the memories of forty years previous in the comfort of Heinrich Fricke's home, we began our tour of the village — and it was a revelation to see just how small it was — not more than a few hundred yards from end to end. Trees still bore the scars of the battle, as did certain of the original buildings which still stand. Unfortunately the carpenter's shop (which was well remembered by Helmut Hoffmann), and into which Guardsman Mendes backed



the Sherman, had long since been pulled down.

When we reached the top of the village where William Harvey-Kelly had been with part of his platoon, he showed us where Barry Quinan had been standing when the shell came straight down the road, narrowly missing his head. William then took us over the route of the break-out through an area still wooded today.

As we back-tracked behind the houses, Jim Connolly suddenly discovered the place where he had been caught in the open when returning to the broken-down Sherman. At the very spot where the mortar burst had exploded a line of spang marks still marked a wooden shed with a piece of nose fuze still embedded in the wood. Then outside Gustav Fricke's house, the drainpipe still bore a hole from another burst of automatic fire.

Inside, we found that the cellar had now been sub-divided into two, making photography rather difficult in the cramped conditions, but a shot of Jim and Helmut on the spot where they had first met forty years before was a must.

The next day, Sunday April 21, 1985, we had specially reserved for a visit to Becklingen War Cemetery, beside the road between Soltau and Celle, where Eddie Charlton, Corporal Unwin and the other Irish Guardsmen killed right at the end of the war in the Elsdorf-Wistedt battle, lie at rest. This was Alwyn Charlton's day, and although this was his third visit to his brother's grave, none was more moving than this one. The cemetery lies on the edge of the Luneburg Heath with a beautiful backcloth of pine trees and heather, yet here, so far from their homes, the typical British look of rose borders and pergolas has created a spot for which only the memorable words of Rupert Brooke can do justice:

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.*





INCIDENT AT IMBER

As the sixth Hurricane approached, it opened fire along the line of spectators 'and maintained fire practically down the whole length of it' . . . 'I realised that I had fired at the crowd.'

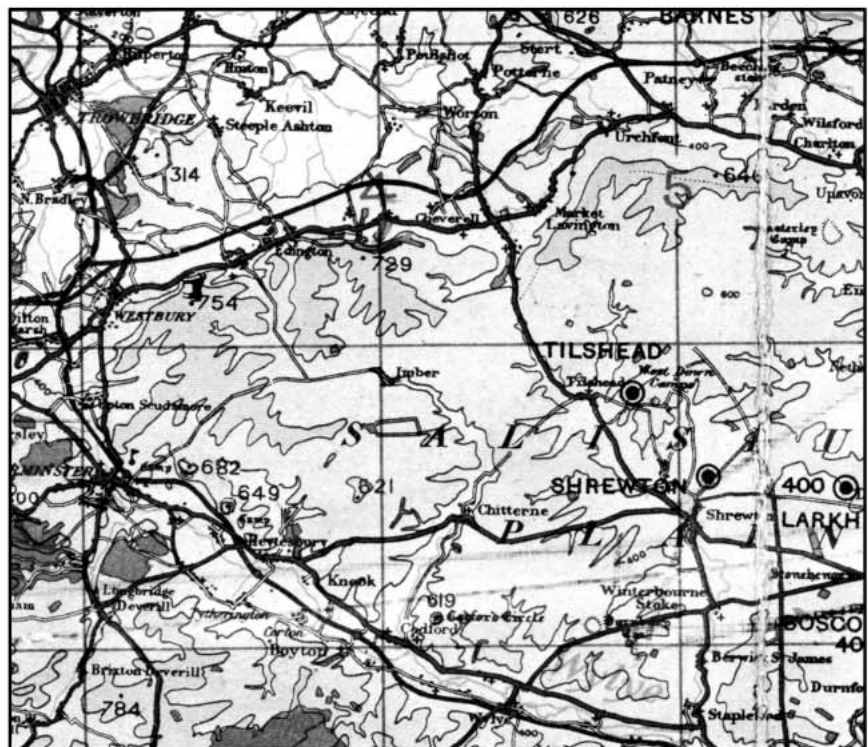
BY DENIS C. BATEMAN

More than 12 per cent of the county of Wiltshire is owned by the Ministry of Defence, the Salisbury Plain Training Area comprising 91,000 acres. Imber and its associated ranges lies in SPTA West — the area to the west of the A360.

In February 1942 Headquarters Fighter Command instructed No. 10 Group to arrange a tactical air demonstration before a largely military audience. The Army's 5 Corps of Southern Command was to be in charge of the demonstration that was to consist of an air attack on tanks, motor vehicles and dummy soldiers. The setting for this exercise — a demonstration of fighter attacks against army columns, to quote No. 10 Group Tactical Exercise No. 27, dated March 16, 1942 — was Imber Ranges near Warminster, on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, traditional training ground of the British Army.

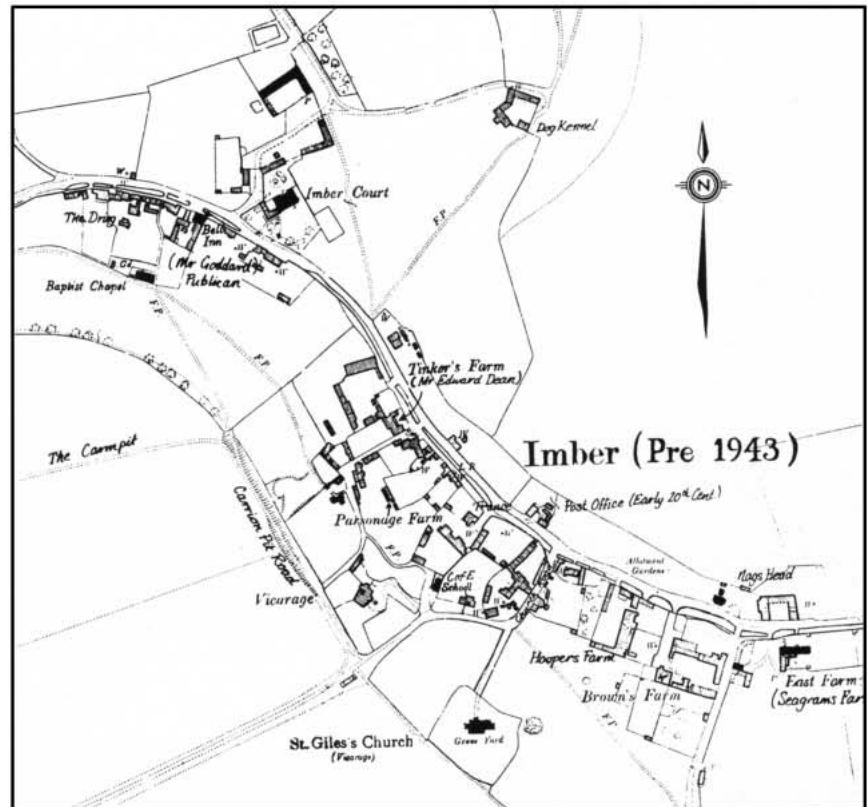
Imber, with its manor house, church, schools, inn, shop and windmill, dates back to prehistoric times, having been in existence for at least 3,000 years, although because of its isolated position, little is recorded of its history. In more recent times Imber followed the pattern of other small Wiltshire villages inhabited by craftsmen and tradesmen. Out in the surrounding countryside lay the farms, most of which were dedicated to sheep-raising.

Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, first envisaged Salisbury Plain as a training area for the British Army, but it was not until 1897 that a War Office Committee was set up to negotiate the purchase of land. During the next five years 43,000 acres were bought. After World War I, during which the Plain was used extensively, the War Office continued to buy more land in the area, Imber village being purchased in the period 1928 to 1932 and finally evacuated by its villagers in 1943.



RAF overprint of the period on the quarter-inch Ordnance Survey.

The question of the provision of training grounds for the British Army in the United Kingdom did not become an important one until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Before then the close-order battle tactics could be taught on the barrack square and if field training was required there was usually a piece of common land conveniently close to the barracks. Also, even when ranges were required, the old smoothbore musket was only fired up to a hundred yards or less. The introduction of the small-bore rifle and the Boer War changed all that. Henceforth a war of movement and small-arms effective out to a thousand yards made the provision of suitable training areas essential. Salisbury Plain, of little value to agriculture in those pre-fertilizer days, and close to the South Coast ports was ideal and the War Department quickly set about purchasing land at around £10 per acre. The Plain was extensively used during the First World War and the emergence of the tank transformed the very nature of future wars and necessitated even more land to practice manoeuvres. In 1919 the Army resumed its land purchases and the area west of the Devizes-Tilshead road as far as Warminster was added. In the centre of this new area lay the little village of Imber, home to some 400 souls. The Army purchased all the freehold in and around the village (except the church and its rectory, the school, chapel and Bell Inn) and although the people were allowed to stay, they were surrounded by a thousand-yard danger zone. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the Plain once again assumed vital importance and exercises with live ammunition made the risk of



civilian casualties unacceptably high. In 1943 the village was finally evacuated with the result that by 1945 it resembled one of the many ruined villages of north-

west Europe, a place which had been used by many thousands of troops perfecting battle techniques — a rôle it still plays today.





Imber Court was the manor house of the village but it had been previously destroyed by fire around 1919. Major Robert Whistler took it over, living temporarily in Tinkers farmhouse owned by the Ferris family, until Imber Court was rebuilt. His son grew up there and also took up an army career, being posted overseas in 1941. Between 1952 and 1959 the War

Department requisitioned and subsequently bought those buildings they had not acquired in the 1928-32 purchase, except for the church and churchyard which are ecclesiastical property. An enquiry in 1961 confirmed the military case for the retention of the village and following this decision public rights of way across the area were closed.



In August 1974, on one of the few open days, we met Major Whistler and his wife Phyllis at his old home. They described it as it was in former days and gave us a guided tour of the village.



Having put down new roots in Bournemouth, sadly Major Whistler died in February 1982.



The Tithe Barn, where village celebrations were always held.



No customers today for the old Bell Inn.



The Army now has unrestricted use of the village and surrounding area, and has built several new blocks more able to withstand ill treatment to help simulate urban battle conditions. In the foreground once stood Tinkers Farm.

Three previous tactical air demonstrations had been held, the first at Imber in October 1941, details of which had been arranged at a conference at Southern Command, presided over by Brigadier Collingwood and attended by Wing Commander J. D. Ronald and Squadron Leader T. E. Hubbard, both of HQ No. 10 Group. At this conference it was decided that signals to aircraft such as pyrotechnics and ground signals were to be the responsibility of the RAF while the Army was to be responsible for all ground markings to distinguish the spectators' enclosure including a white arrow that would lead up to the targets. The officer responsible for fulfilling the Army's role was Lieutenant-Colonel Millet. The demonstration, attended by Air Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas, AOC-in-C, Fighter Command, was successfully carried out and No. 10 Group's orders for this demonstration were circulated to all Groups as the basis for future demonstrations.

Squadron Leader Gordon Neil Spencer Cleaver, Operations III of No. 10 Group, was made responsible for the staff arrangements for the forthcoming demonstration planned to take place on March 23, but postponed to April 13 because of bad weather. Major George Eric Burnand Mount, Royal Artillery, GSOII(SD) [General Staff Officer, 2nd Class (Special Duties)] at HQ 5 Corps was detailed to look after the Army's arrangements. He and Cleaver met at HQ No. 10 Group to discuss the plans for the demonstration and Mount asked for an RAF officer to accompany him on a reconnaissance over the area to check that the flying and safety aspects of the ground would be right. This ground reconnaissance was undertaken by Mount and Squadron Leader William Francis Blackadder, deputising for Wing Commander Ian Glead, and between them they selected the site at Imber where the first demonstration had taken place, the selection later being approved by Headquarters Fighter Command.

As already mentioned the demonstration was originally scheduled to take place at mid-day on March 23, with a full rehearsal the day before. The instructions, issued on March 16, gave information that the demonstration, 'in conjunction with 5 Corps' was 'to show the damage that fighter aircraft equipped with cannon and machine guns can do to soldiers on the march, transport columns, and tanks'.

The order went on to say that the three types of targets would be represented by:

- (a) a number of dummy soldiers which will be dispersed in 3 parallel columns 50 yards apart
- (b) 15 unserviceable lorries, 3 of which will contain petrol
- (c) 2 tanks.

The 'intention' was to demonstrate the tactics employed by fighters attacking a transport column 'to give a firing display on the targets provided as follows:

- (a) On the dummy personnel by a flight of No. 245 Squadron (Hurricane IIBs) and a flight of No. 501 Squadron (Spitfire VBs)
- (b) On the lorry column by one flight of No. 501 Squadron (Spitfire VBs); one flight of Hurricane IICs of No. 245 Squadron and one flight of Whirlwinds of No. 263 Squadron

- (c) Cannon attacks on tanks by No. 87 Squadron (Hurricane IICs).

Instruction (a) above was later amended to read 'On Dummy personnel by No. 175 Squadron (without bombs)'.

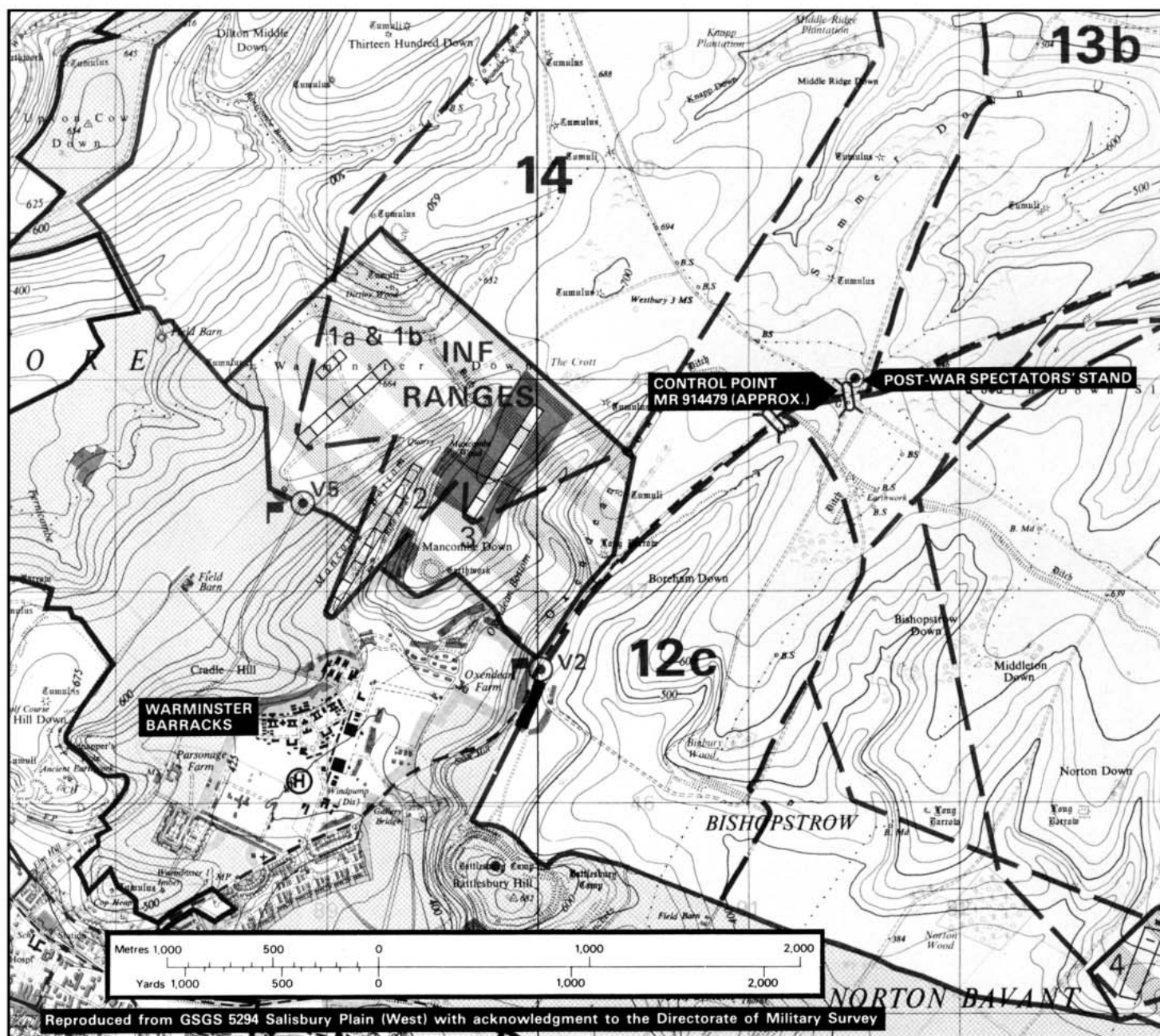
The lorries, tanks 'and many dummy soldiers' in three parallel columns were to be positioned with the tanks nearest to the spectators, the dummy soldiers in the centre and the lorries on the far side. 'Three white ground strips making an arrow pointing down the line of lorries will be spaced 200 yards from the first lorry.'

The spectators were to be assembled on a 400-yard front with the centre opposite and the same distance from the first target; the enclosure to be surrounded by white strips.

Detailed to be Controller of the demonstration was Wing Commander James Douglas Ronald, the Armament Officer at No. 10 Group Headquarters. Wing Commander Ronald has a major part in this story



Nevertheless relatives are still allowed to visit St Giles and its churchyard (which are out of bounds) on specific days and a service of Evensong is held every year.



of the Imber tragedy, which he himself describes as 'the horrible nightmare ... which occurred over 42 years ago'.

James Ronald ('call me JR, everybody does') was born on August 26, 1911 at Chingford, Essex, and was educated at Rottingdean School and Brighton College before going to Brazenose College, Oxford. A keen sportsman, Ronald played cricket and rugby for Oxford, rugby for the Harlequins and later was reserve for the England team.

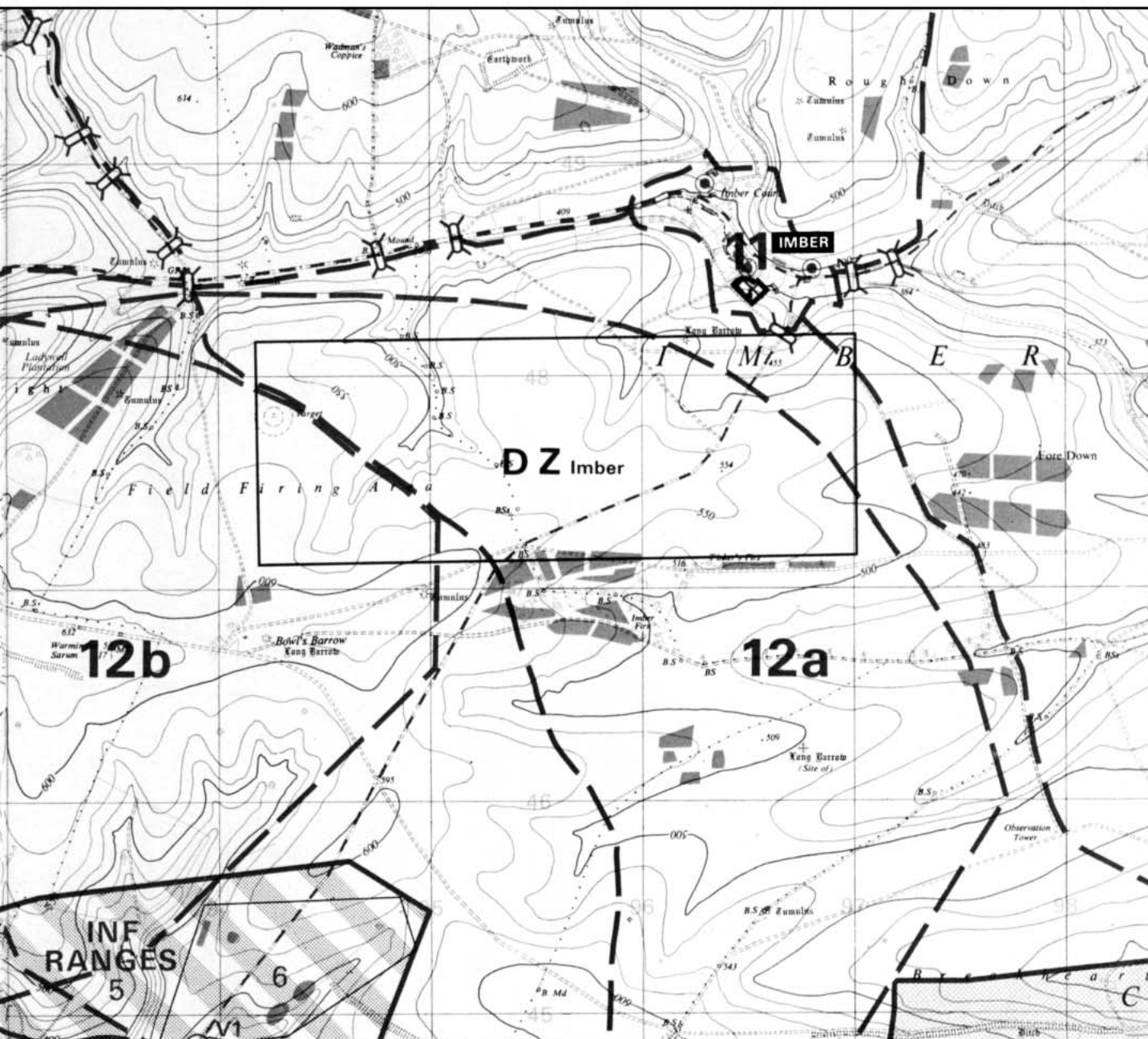
In 1931 Ronald joined the Reserve of Air Force Officers, and on October 19, 1936, he was granted a Permanent Commission in the Royal Air Force as a Pilot Officer. After training and a first posting to No. 151 Squadron, Ronald eventually took the Long Armament Course and in May 1941 was appointed Armament Officer at Headquarters No. 10 Group at Rudloe Manor in Wiltshire. After a distinguished career, in which he became Director of Personnel (Assimilation) at the Air Ministry, Ronald retired on September 17, 1963 with the rank of Air Commodore, the CBE and AFC.

As Armament Officer, Ronald was entirely responsible for the organisation, ground arrangements and safety precautions. The

trials tested the efficiency of cannon aircraft versus tanks and gradually developed into demonstrations of tactical support for the Army for which Wing Commander Ronald was tactical adviser and controller. For the demonstrations Ronald's safety calculations were based on a diagram taken from Air Publication 1244 (Armament Training Manual: Training Courses). This showed the danger area required for an air to ground firing range in which the targets covered a 600-yard frontage. Ronald based his calculations on targets 3 and 4, together representing the frontage of the column; according to the diagram this allowed 250 yards to spare with another 150 yards for the spectators. The nearest point of the spectators' enclosure was at an angle of 45 degrees from where it was reasonably expected the aircraft would start firing.

On Thursday, April 9, the telephone rang in the office of Squadron Leader John Robert Pennington Legh, the Officer Commanding No. 175 Squadron at Warmwell in Dorset. On the line was Squadron Leader Peter Robinson, the Controller at Middle Wallop. During their conversation he informed Pennington Legh that his squadron had been detailed to take

part in a demonstration at Imber on the following Monday with a rehearsal on the day before. Robinson gave Pennington Legh the times on both days and before ringing off said that written orders would follow. The next afternoon (10th) Pennington Legh received another call, this time from Squadron Leader Christopher Frederick Currant, CO of No. 501 Squadron at Ibsley in Hampshire. That same afternoon Currant had been instructed by Wing Commander Ian Gleed to take over his duties as Sector Wing Leader for the weekend as he would be away. (According to Group Captain Geoffrey Ambler, Station Commander of RAF Middle Wallop, Gleed had not had a break during the previous six weeks, had been 'heavily pressed' with operations and had been Acting Station and Sector Commander during his (Ambler's) absence on duty. Ambler, therefore, agreed to let Gleed have 48 hours leave and to appoint Currant as his deputy for the exercise. This action was agreed by No. 10 Group's Senior Air Staff Officer.) The duties consisted of organising three Army demonstrations including the Imber one on April 13. Gleed discussed the demonstrations with Currant, most of the time being spent in talking over



the one on the 13th, this being the most important and complicated. Currant understood that, apart from his own, four other squadrons were taking part: Nos. 204 from Ibsley, 175 from Warmwell and 263 and 245 both from Middle Wallop.

During the telephone conversation between Currant and Pennington Legh the former discovered that Pennington Legh had not received No. 10 Group's instructions covering the demonstration. He therefore said that he would fly over with a copy that evening and explain it to Pennington Legh. At their subsequent meeting Currant went over each paragraph with the aid of Sheet 11 of the quarter-inch to the mile map series. Currant pointed out to the CO of No. 175 Squadron that Item 2 (the timetable) of the Group's instructions, i.e. the attack on the dummy soldiers, would be carried out 'entirely by his squadron'. It was also pointed out to him that Item 2 was split into two five-minute periods and the two Flights of No. 175 Squadron would take both of them. (This was in place of a Flight each of Nos. 245 and 501 Squadrons.) Currant told Pennington Legh 'to fly over with his squadron' the following day (Saturday) to look at the target area and to 'carry out a

The location chosen for the 5 Corps demonstration was about 5,000 yards due west of Imber just south of Summer Down. The operational records gives the map reference 354685 — this of course being the Modified British Grid then in use. Although the National Grid was introduced in the 1930s, the War Office continued to use their own military overprint grid throughout the Second World War. On this current map of the Salisbury West Training Area the equivalent National Grid reference for the control point in use on April 13, 1942 is 914479.

dummy run on the targets'. Finally, Currant said that if he (Pennington Legh) was unclear on any points, and if 'there was anything he wished to know to give me a ring'. Unfortunately, the weather on Saturday, April 11, in Pennington Legh's words 'was not suitable'. This was substantiated by Squadron Leader Currant in his evidence to the subsequent Court of Inquiry. No. 175 Squadron was therefore prevented from flying over the target area.

Before moving on to April 12, the day of the rehearsal, it would be as well to look at the arrangements made for that day and the following one and whose responsibility they were.

As we have already seen the demonstration was for the benefit of 5 Corps and certain responsibilities were allotted to this formation. These included the provision of

targets, a spectators' enclosure, car park, military police, anti-aircraft protection, white ground strips to show the positioning of the spectators' enclosure, and a white arrow indicating the direction of the target. These were the arrangements to be executed by Major George Mount or so Squadron Leader Gordon Cleaver assumed. Cleaver had drafted the orders for the demonstration and was responsible for the RAF arrangements, which included signals and providing a Controller. However, that part of the orders dealing with the provision of the white ground strips was ambiguous. It stated that the spectators' 'enclosure will be surrounded by a white strip'. It failed to specify who would provide it.

At the pilots' briefing at 1.00 p.m. on April 12, they were informed that white strips would surround the spectators' enclosure and an

arrow would point the target, but at the rehearsal neither ground strips nor arrow were in place. The absence of the arrow was remarked upon, although strangely, the missing strips went unnoticed. When Major Mount was asked to explain the absence of the arrow he replied that he had not understood this to be an Army responsibility. However, he promised to have the arrow in place the following day.

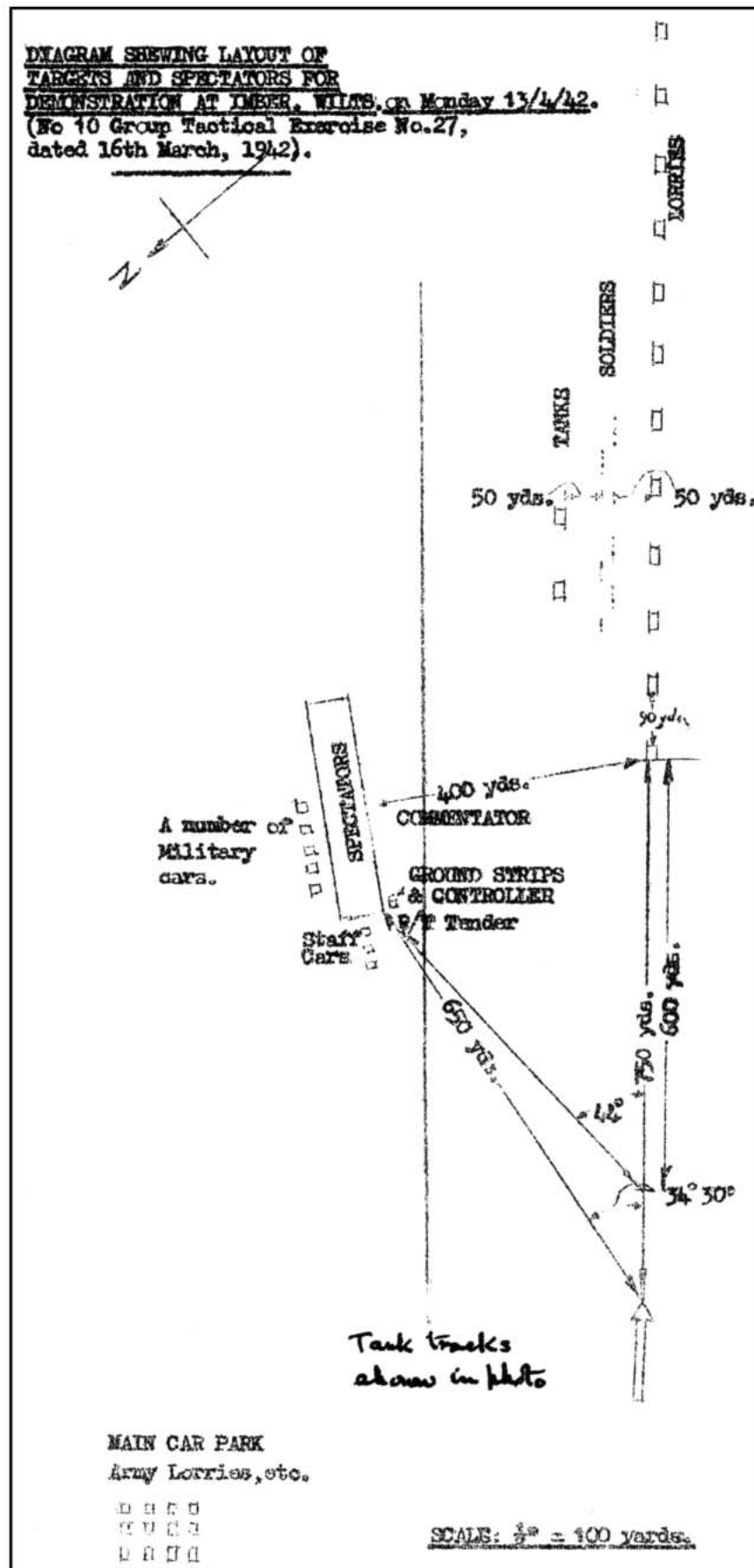
The rehearsal took place at 2.00 p.m. on Sunday, April 12, and went according to plan with one exception: only six aircraft of No. 175 Squadron took part instead of the intended twelve. After the Order had been written No. 245 Squadron had had all their Hurricane IIBs withdrawn and it was decided to use the Hurricane bombers of No. 175 Squadron in a fighter role replacing No. 245 Squadron in that part of the demonstration. Therefore, on April 7, an amendment to the Order was issued detailing No. 175 Squadron (without bombs) to attack the dummy personnel. When he eventually read the order the CO of No. 175 Squadron was under the (false) impression that he had to provide only one flight. When notified of his error he agreed to provide nine aircraft for the following day; however, the extra three would have had no rehearsal.

On Sunday, April 12 the weather was fine. Group Captain Ambler flew over Imber in a Spitfire to watch the rehearsal that commenced at 2.00 p.m. Ambler's main purpose was to test the R/T communications with the mobile tender for which he was responsible. As he flew over the demonstration area he noticed that while he could easily see the lorries and tanks he could not see the dummy soldiers although he knew their position. Ambler was also aware that the arrow and ground strips were not in place. That evening he telephoned Squadron Leader Thomas Edward Hubbard, Operations Staff Officer at No. 10 Group HQ, who had organised the first demonstration for the Army at Imber six months earlier. Ambler, in his evidence to the later convened Court of Inquiry, said he pointed out to Hubbard the absence of the arrow and ground strips, to which Hubbard replied that they were an Army responsibility but he would take up the matter. When he came to give evidence Hubbard said that he did 'not recollect this conversation'.

At about 1.45 p.m. Squadron Leader Pennington Legh led the six aircraft of No. 175 Squadron from Warmwell to Imber arriving 'a little late'. Although able to make radio contact with the ground the reception was very bad.

Almost at once the squadron was ordered to attack the dummy targets, which it did in line astern formation; afterwards five aircraft returned to Warmwell while Pennington Legh flew first to Colerne, then on to HQ, No. 10 Group where he took part in a conference for a similar demonstration on April 16. While there he was asked why only six of his squadron's aircraft had participated in the afternoon's rehearsal. Pennington Legh replied that he 'was under the impression that six aircraft only were needed' but promised to provide another three for the demonstration. Squadron Leader Currant advised him to practice his squadron in dummy attacks on the range at Imber the following day.

After the rehearsal Wing Commander Ronald, the Controller, commented on the 'tactical approach' and the 'getaway' of No. 234 Squadron, and the approach of No. 175 Squadron. The latter squadron, in Ronald's opinion, had attacked in sections instead of in a loose astern formation. Ronald telephoned both squadron COs that evening and told them what he wanted. He later told the Court of Inquiry that 'all practice firing attacks were made in the correct manner . . . straight down to the targets', and he saw nothing that might suggest danger anywhere except 'in the target area'.



This is the only diagram which exists of the layout of the exercise area on April 13. It is rather rough and ready yet one significant factor has been added in ink: the line of the tank tracks which are still visible from the air today — see picture opposite. The reference 'show in photo' is in respect of the picture reproduced on page 29. (Public Record Office AIR 20/6397.)



The weather over the target area on Monday, April 13, was fine but hazy making visibility bad when looking into the sun. Wing Commander Ronald arrived at the Imber range about an hour before the demonstration was due to commence. He set about marking out with white strips his Controller's position in front of the R/T tender. While he was so engaged Squadron Leader Cleaver mentioned to him that the white directional arrow was too near the target. It had been incorrectly positioned in a hollow and it was unlikely that the attacking aircraft would see it. Ronald immediately re-positioned the arrow on the top of a hill so that it was now between 500 and 600 yards from the targets and visible (as he thought) to the aircraft.

Although Ronald was the Controller of the demonstration, and as such, was the flying controller, he was not to be in direct radio communication with the aircraft; his orders were to be passed to the pilots via the radio operator and one other. This latter person was Squadron Leader Ernest Waite Wootten, the Tactics Officer at No. 10 Group, who stood with Ronald ten yards in front of the R/T tender.

Some time between 11.00 a.m. and 11.15 a.m. Group Captain Geoffrey Ambler, Station and Sector Commander at RAF Middle Wallop, received a telephone call from Group Captain Arthur Vere Harvey, Ops I at HQ No. 10 Group. Harvey, fresh from the AOC's morning conference, was conveying Air Vice-Marshal Augustus Henry Orlebar's instructions to Ambler regarding the training of No. 175 Squadron in high level bombing. Harvey also warned Ambler that one and a half squadrons from the Ibsley Wing might be required for operations later in the day, but these aircraft would not be taken from those involved in the Imber demonstration. Harvey went on to say that he would possibly move No. 402 Squadron into Ambler's sector. Ambler's protests that this would upset the arrangements for the exercise and that

After the war a permanent raised spectators' stand was provided some distance to the north of the enclosure used in 1942. (Ordnance Survey, Crown Copyright)

Squadron Leader Currant, the Deputy Wing Leader, was the only one available to lead and was also handling the exercise, were overruled. He was informed that the operations had to come first and to go ahead with the exercise in addition to preparing for the operation.

Ambler solved a difficult problem by putting Squadron Leader Blackadder in charge at Imber and instructing Currant to lead the Wing in the forthcoming operation. Both officers were told by Ambler that if the operation was cancelled Currant would re-assume command of the exercise. Currant told Ambler that if the operation went ahead he would have to take some of his best pilots out of the Imber exercise and to this Ambler agreed. Currant then said that this would mean that two or three of the pilots in the exercise would not have taken part in the rehearsal. Ambler, uneasy at this, instructed Currant to 'brief them very carefully' and to be sure that they knew the target layout. Currant was to 'instruct them to be very careful'.

Soon afterwards, at 11.45 a.m. Group Captain Ambler, accompanied by Flight Lieutenant Whiteley, the Commentator, left Middle Wallop arriving at Imber about one hour later. Meeting Major Mount, Ambler asked him why there were no markings around the spectators' enclosure. Mount had with him ten white strips so Ambler divided them into two lots of five and used one lot to make an arrow which he placed 200 yards from the target lorries and then laid the other five some 25 yards in front of the enclosure. Unfortunately, there was only enough material to form a dotted line pattern at the front, the rest of the enclosure was unmarked.

It was soon after 1.00 p.m. that Wing Commander Ronald arrived at Imber, accompanied by Squadron Leaders Wootten

and Cleaver. Group Captain Ambler took the opportunity to tell Cleaver about the missing white lines from around the enclosure and Cleaver replied that they were the responsibility of the Army; Ambler then told him what he had already done with the available strips and a few minutes later, as we have already seen, Ronald re-positioned the arrow.

During their conversation Ambler told Cleaver about the proposed offensive operation and how it had interfered with the demonstration. Cleaver said that the operation had since been cancelled and suggested that the aircraft should be called up on the R/T to carry out a practice on the lines of the rehearsal. On consulting his watch, Ambler saw that the time was now 1.30 p.m. and thought that by this time the aircraft would be taking off for the demonstration, leaving insufficient time for a practice. He told Cleaver that a practice would cause more confusion and that matters should be left as they were. Ambler then left the officers from No. 10 Group and joined the Commentator who was positioned about 50 yards in front of the centre of the spectators' enclosure.

At about this time over at Royal Air Force Warmwell, nine aircraft of No. 175 Squadron were preparing to take off. Earlier in the day Squadron Leader Pennington Legh had briefed all the pilots who were to participate in that afternoon's demonstration, three of whom had not taken part in the rehearsal the day before. All were told the location, their flight formation, method of attack and positioning of the targets which were illustrated by diagrams on a blackboard. Pennington Legh impressed upon the pilots the need for keeping a good formation and instructed them 'to be careful where they fired'. He later believed that he also mentioned the arrow and that the spectators' enclosure would be marked by white strips.



Squadron Leader Christopher Currant of No. 501 Squadron (Spitfire VBs) had been deputised by Wing Commander Ian Glead to take over the latter's duties of Sector Wing Leader for the fateful weekend. (IWM)



To Squadron Leader John Pennington Legh (pictured here in May 1943) fell the unfortunate duty of leading his squadron — motto 'Stop at Nothing' — into what was to become their most inglorious action of the war. (IWM)

No. 175 Squadron had been formed just six weeks before on March 3, Squadron Leader F. M. Smith being posted in as CO six days later from No. 52 Operational Training Unit. However, his stay with the squadron was short-lived. On March 30 Smith was posted overseas, his place as CO being taken by Flight Lieutenant Pennington Legh, who was promoted to Squadron Leader to fill the vacancy. On the same day the squadron adjutant was posted to Exeter.

The squadron spent its first month in training, test flying and hoping for operational duty. The latter came on April 10, when, after four changes of readiness between 6.25 a.m. and 9.00 a.m., the squadron 'scrambled' for the first time at 3.20 p.m. patrolling over Portland.

So a newly-formed squadron led by a newly-promoted commanding officer took off at 1.40 p.m. to take part in a demonstration of live firing before a large audience; a demonstration for which there had been only one rehearsal for six of the pilots and no rehearsal at all for the other three.

At Ibsley a similar scene had been enacted as the CO of No. 501 Squadron, Squadron Leader Currant, prepared to leave for Middle Wallop where his squadron was already waiting. At 11.15 a.m. he was notified that one Flight, led by himself, might be needed for an operation with No. 11 Group. An hour and a half later, Currant was told that the operation was cancelled and he could proceed to Middle Wallop. As with No. 175 Squadron, 501 had withdrawn pilots from the demonstration for the operation, putting in three unrehearsed pilots, two of whom could not now be replaced; these two were briefed by Currant himself and another officer. At 1.50

p.m. the three Flights of No. 501 Squadron, led by Currant, left Middle Wallop for Imber.

The spectators' enclosure, divided into stands, held over 2,000 people according to the AOC of No. 10 Group. These consisted of

mainly Army personnel, although some members of the RAF (including the Air Officer Commanding No. 10 Group), Royal Navy and Home Guard plus a few civilians were also there. Behind them lay the spec-



The first tactical air demonstration held on the site selected by Major Mount and Squadron Leader Blackadder west of Imber had taken place the previous October attended by the AOC-in-C Fighter Command Air Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas. (IWM)



tators' car park. In rank the spectators ranged from a General Officer (Lieutenant-General Sir Gerald Templer, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Southern Command), through an Air Vice-Marshal, several Brigadiers to Leading Aircraftmen and Privates. Many of the other ranks undoubtedly looked upon the demonstration as an afternoon out — a change from the normal routine — but for the officers, particularly the more senior ranks, this was another serious exercise in air power against ground targets.

Among the small crowd of civilians at Imber that day was an 18-year-old junior clerk from Warminster Barracks. Bernard Butcher, watching the demonstration with Mr. Matthews, an older colleague, was himself just a few days away from joining the Army. We shall be returning to Bernard Butcher later in the story.

The exercise commenced at 2.00 p.m. with a tactical demonstration without firing by No. 234 Squadron which was successfully accomplished. While this was going on the nine aircraft of No. 175 Squadron arrived some ten minutes early and had to orbit the area. While orbiting, Squadron Leader Pennington Legh received three R/T messages telling him (a) that his squadron would be 'on' in seven minutes; (b) that it would be 'on' in two minutes; (c) to carry on. Upon receipt of this last order Pennington Legh gave the order 'line astern'.

When the 'carry on' order was received No. 175 Squadron was on the south side of the target and completed its circuit before lining up to attack. Pennington-Legh led the squadron and approached 'on a steady diving turn'. He could not see the arrow and experienced 'great difficulty' in seeing the dummy soldiers only being able to pick them out at 200 feet and when 200 yards away. He did, however, make a good attack. Pennington Legh was followed by Pilot Officer D. K. Robertson who fired too late and Sergeant Walter Robins who overshot and did not fire at all. Robins stated later that 'it was practically impossible to discern anything while looking into the sun due to the haze'. Robins found that he could see neither the directional arrow nor the strips that marked the

Safety precautions appeared pretty casual — some officers and vehicles are standing beyond the roped-off spectators' enclosure. Air Vice-Marshal Augustus Orlebar, Air Officer Commanding No. 10 Group, was present at both exercises. (The Air Vice-Marshal may be better known as the leader of the RAF's High-Speed Flight, being awarded the Air Force Cross and Bar for his victories in the 1924 and 1929 Schneider Trophy races.) (IWM)

enclosure. All he saw was 'a mass at the back of the first lorry' that may have been the spectators.

Flight Lieutenant Ford in the fourth Hurricane fired too late but Flight Sergeant Peters, No. 5, made a good attack. Whilst Ford had been making his run, Squadron Leader Wootten, who, with Wing Commander Ronald was standing near one of the two R/T trucks, suggested to Ronald that the pilots should be told to open fire sooner, to which Ronald agreed. Wootten walked to the R/T tender, stood by the door and, according to Sergeant Leslie Victor Gyer, Deputy

Controller who was manning the R/T, asked him to transmit the following message to the remaining 175 Squadron aircraft: 'If you cannot see the target fire anyway, but before reaching the spectators'.

At the Inquiry Gyer said that he called up the aircraft using their code name 'Cornish' and gave them the message. It was not acknowledged but in the circumstances this was not expected. Flight Sergeant Peters then made his attack and Gyer *on his own initiative* transmitted 'Good show'. He said later he did this to tell the remaining aircraft that this was the kind of attack that was wanted.



Major John Richardson of Headquarters, School of Infantry at Warminster, kindly acted as our escort for two visits to the range. The two woods on the skyline, although they have now nearly grown together, still stand as a point of reference.





MOIRE DE CEUX
RIRENT D'UNE
NJUSTE HOMME
E DE TON COEUR
NOIS LACRY AVTE



Sergeant William John Andrew McLachlan, not yet 21 years old, was born in Spokane in the state of Washington. He had joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1940 and was posted to No. 175 Squadron on March 20, 1942, just over three weeks before the demonstration, from No. 245 Squadron. McLachlan was an inexperienced combat pilot having approximately 270 total flying hours to his credit, about 100 of which were on Hurricanes. He had fired his guns three times before April 13, had never had any cine gun training and had only once carried out a low-flying attack on military targets during an exercise.

Sergeant McLachlan, in Hurricane BE417, was No. 6 in the formation and as he orbited the area he found that he was unable to see the first few aircraft. The pilots had been ordered to fly at quarter of a mile intervals, but McLachlan found he was falling further behind. It was then that he received the R/T messages giving the two minute warning and the order to attack. As McLachlan followed the aircraft in front of him a third message came over the R/T. He told the Inquiry that although he could not remember the exact words he thought they were 'Whether you can see the target or not fire anyway'. McLachlan was experiencing the same trouble as those pilots going before him — having difficulty in seeing the target and therefore 'not getting in a long enough burst or not firing at all'.

As he started his dive McLachlan could not see the target area, the ground strips or the spectators' enclosure. He followed the No. 5 aircraft, saw it turn, dive and straighten out, then lost sight of it. As he, in turn, straightened out, he saw what he thought were the dummy troops in marching order as on manoeuvres and transport in the places where he expected them to be. This, he thought, was the target. It was at this moment that he heard another radio message 'Good show, aircraft that has just fired'. He dived straight towards what he assumed to be the target and when about 600 yards away pressed the firing

Cane in hand, Air Commodore (then Wing Commander) 'JR' Ronald, controller of the exercise, points out the position of the spectators' enclosure to our author Denis Bateman and Major Richardson. Editor and deputy orient the map on pages 20-21.

button giving the 'troops' a burst of about one second. Thinking this was a little short, he raised the Hurricane's nose and fired another short burst. It was when he saw people running that he realised that he had fired at the spectators.

Wing Commander James Ronald watched the sixth Hurricane come in for the attack. Flying at about 2,000 feet the aircraft was coming in 'west and north of the arrow' and was heading for the spectators; if he was to follow the line several of the other aircraft had taken he would have to turn to starboard to

get on to the target. Ronald waited for the turn, but with horror came the sudden realisation that the Hurricane was not going to turn and that the pilot had mistaken the spectators for the dummy troops. The Hurricane was now flying at an estimated 700 feet and was about 500 yards away. It was at this moment that Ronald saw the flash of its guns and he instinctively dived for cover, but realising 'that this was not doing any good' he rushed to where a Vey pistol lay and fired 'but was too late'. He fired again at the oncoming seventh aircraft. Unfortunately, this



From the vantage point of the new viewing platform, 'JR' indicates the direction from which the aircraft came. The woods can be seen in the background.



The moment of truth when twenty-five men died. Clip from Sergeant McLachlan's camera gun as he dives towards the spectators. The lack of any detail or definition is indicative of the bad visibility the pilots experienced attacking into the sun.

did not have the desired effect and the aircraft and the remaining two fired their guns in spite of a call from Sergeant Gyer in the R/T truck telling them to stop firing. The demonstration was finally aborted by the R/T and the aircraft were told to return to base.

Major Mount was lying in the grass near the Commentator when the accident happened. Jumping to his feet he found Air Vice-Marshal Orlebar, the AOC, and asked him to cancel the rest of the demonstration. Orlebar ran to Ronald and shouted the order to abort, then he made his way to the R/T truck to

verify that this had been done and instructed Sergeant Gyer to call up the Middle Wallop Operations Room for the immediate despatch of medical officers and ambulances. The nearest Army units were also requested to send help. Orlebar then went back to a scene that must have resembled a small battleground with the dead, dying and injured lying around. He helped to make the wounded as comfortable as possible until the ambulances arrived when the medical arrangements were taken over by a Colonel of the Royal Army Medical Corps. Orlebar then left for Middle

Wallop in a Puss Moth of Army Co-operation Command, and on arrival interviewed the pilots who had been involved in the demonstration. He also arranged for another medical officer to fly to Imber with extra supplies of morphia. It was during the interview that Squadron Leader Currant handed Orlebar a message purporting to have been sent to the aircraft just prior to the shooting. This read 'Hello, Cornish aircraft, fire earlier — fire earlier — fire in front of the spectators. Hello, Cornish aircraft — if you cannot see the target fire anyway — fire at anything.'



Today the whole Salisbury Plain Training Area is a prohibited zone to aircraft up to 30,000 feet. There are very few days when the ranges are inactive but we were fortunate that Easter this

year fell close to the precise anniversary of the disaster. This is our comparison taken on April 6, 1985. The hulks of armoured vehicles still litter the nearby tank range today.



Squadron Leader Ernest Wootten pictured two months after the disaster. To him the Court of Inquiry attributed the sending of the 'fire anyway' message. He retired from the RAF in 1973 as an Air Commodore with the DFC and Bar and AFC. (IWM)



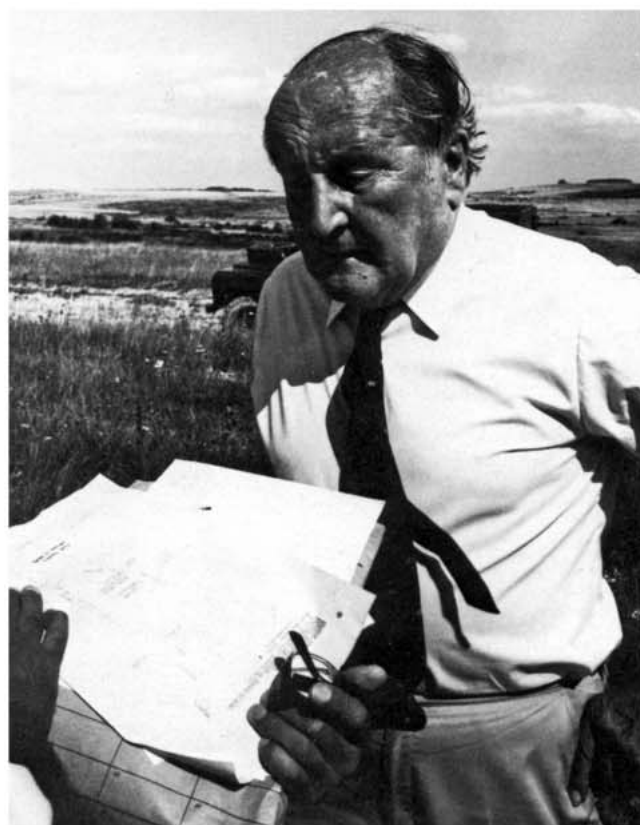
General Sir Gerald Templer, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Southern Command escaped uninjured. (IWM)

Group Captain Ambler was also watching the demonstration from a place near the Commentator. He saw one of the Hurricanes approach in what he thought was 'a dangerous direction and too near to the spectators'. It appeared to be attacking along a different line of approach to the previous aircraft. He saw the flash of the guns and although he knew what was happening was powerless to take action. It seemed to him that the bullets were striking short of the crowd and the second burst appeared to hit between the Commentator and the spectators. In common with the rest, Ambler dropped to the ground, but rose when the firing ceased and ran to the R/T truck where he met AVM Orlebar. Just then Flight Lieutenant Charles Owen Cook, the

Middle Wallop Signals Officer ran up. Cook had been in the R/T tender with Sergeant Gyer when Wootten passed his 'fire anyway' message, followed by the shooting. He had seen earth flying about around the tender so had ducked, but, what he estimated as about one second later, raised his head and saw a red Very light overhead. He ran out of the tender and saw Group Captain Ambler who said 'My God, this is awful. It killed ever so many'. He asked Ambler to come aside and said that he thought he knew the cause of the accident and told him of Wootten's message. Ambler asked Cook who had originated the message and Cook replied 'That fat Squadron Leader over there', pointing to Wootten as he did not know the officer's name.

After the AOC had left Imber by air, Ambler sent a message by R/T to Middle Wallop ordering Squadron Leaders Currant and Pennington Legh and the pilots of the last three Hurricanes to report immediately at that station. He then set out for Middle Wallop in the AOC's car. Three officers were awaiting him in his office on his arrival — Currant, Pennington Legh and Wing Commander Glead. Currant had with him the alleged R/T message that was handed over to AVM Orlebar.

Air Commodore Ronald attempted to avert an even greater tragedy by firing off flares to abort the operation. On the spot where it happened — 43 years later.





Above: Brigadier Vere Stokes, to whom General Templer was chatting at the time, was shot through both legs. **Right:** Another survivor was the future Lord Cranborne although his health was affected by his wounds and he was forced to give up his Bournemouth West seat in the House of Commons in 1954. (Keystone)



Bernard Butcher and Mr Matthews, being civilians, were at the rear of the crowd of Service spectators. This fact could well have saved their lives or spared them serious injuries; they fell flat during the bursts of firing and were not hit.

Now recently retired from employment at the School of Infantry, Warminster, Mr Butcher still vividly remembers that April day, although his main impressions were of the speed with which the casualties were handled and the efficiency of the relief organisation under the supervision of Superintendent Tom Barratt of the Warminster Police.

At the time of the incident, Bernard Butcher had just three days left before he joined the Army. Forty-two years later he said his reaction to the shooting was, 'Why am I joining the Army if this is what they do to their own men'.

The aftermath of the shooting was one of horror, fortitude and efficiency. Horror at what had happened and at the sight of the bodies, lifeless and still. Fortitude by the injured as they lay numb or in pain. Efficiency by the police and medical services, civil and military. Colonel Glyn Hughes, Assistant

and the final actions at the site of the disaster were taken by Major Mount, Wing Commander Ronald and Squadron Leader Cleaver. They superintended the digging out of the arrow's position and ordered it to be wired in. Then Mount ordered that the posts of the stand should be left and requested of the Officer Commanding Troops from Warminster that nothing be interfered with. OC Troops complied with the request and mounted a patrol around the area.

So ended the demonstration at Imber on April 13, 1942 — a day in which a British aircraft had strafed and killed or injured (albeit inadvertently) almost 100 British servicemen.

Twenty-five servicemen had been killed and

another seventy-one injured in this tragic accident. The dead included Brigadier R. A. Grant Taylor, OBE, MC, a senior staff officer at Headquarters, 5 Corps, while among the injured were Brigadier H. V. Stokes from 47 (London) Division and Brigadier W. A. F. L. Fox-Pitt, commanding 5th Guards Armoured Brigade, part of the Guards Armoured Division. Another from this Division who was seriously injured was Lieutenant The Hon. Robert Cecil of the 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards. Cecil, the heir of Viscount Cranborne, Secretary of State for the Colonies, was shot in the lung and was one of those taken to Warminster Hospital where the bullet was removed the following night.



Colonel Glyn Hughes took charge of rescue operations; casualties were taken to hospitals at Shaftesbury, Tidworth, Warminster, Salisbury and Bath.

Director of Medical Services, Guards Armoured Division, took charge and within a very short while (the first ambulance arrived in fifteen minutes) some 30 civil and military ambulances were conveying the injured, dead and dying to several hospitals in the district, and within approximately one hour all casualties had been evacuated. The surviving spectators left Imber in coaches and lorries



Tidworth Military Cemetery — last resting place for Major Adrian Fitzgerald, RE.



Rudloe Manor, wartime headquarters of No. 10 Group and scene of the Court of Inquiry. Today the manor is still in RAF hands, having been occupied at various times by the Royal Observer Corps, 81 Group, Technical Training Command, Signals Command and is currently HQ of the Provost and Security Service.

The Court of Inquiry opened at Headquarters, No. 10 Group at RAF Rudloe Manor on April 14, 1942, the day following the incident. Presiding over the Court was Air Commodore S. E. Toomer, DFC, of HQ No. 9 Group; sitting with him were Group Captain R. W. C. Lywood, HQ Fighter Command, and Wing Commander M. V. Blake, DFC, of RAF Portreath. In attendance on the Court was Colonel R. B. Butler, CIE, CBE, MC, Assistant Adjutant-General, HQ 5 Corps.

Sixteen witnesses were seen by the Court and a visit was made to Imber where the Court watched a similar demonstration. The site, the placing of the arrow, and 'the point where it was reasonably expected that a pilot would open fire' were all considered by the Court to be satisfactory. However, the methods of marking and the layout of the targets came in for comment under the Court's recommendations.

Some blame was placed on Squadron Leader Pennington Legh for not ensuring that his pilots fully understood the details of the exercise and for failing to take the replacement pilots over the area beforehand.

The moving of the directional arrow from its designated place 200 yards from the nearest target to a distance of 700 yards was mentioned by the Court. It found that the arrow was of not much use to the pilots and wondered whether this was because it had been moved from where the pilots had expected to see it.

In a section headed 'Dangerous Messages', the Court dealt with those passed over the R/T, i.e. 'If you cannot see the target fire anyway, but before reaching the spectators'; 'Good show, aircraft which has just passed' (*sic*). The first message was denied by both Squadron Leader Wootten and Wing Commander Ronald who said that the message sent was 'Tell them to fire sooner'. No comment was made on the second message other than that it was sent by the radio operator on his own initiative. The Court could not decide if these messages had had any bearing upon the actions of Sergeant McLachlan, but thought they had confirmed his impression that he was on the right course.

It was the Court's opinion that one, or perhaps two, witnesses must have realised that McLachlan was preparing to fire 'off the line of the targets', but took no action. This was qualified by the statement that 'in the circum-

stances' it was unlikely that the pilot would have seen a signal.

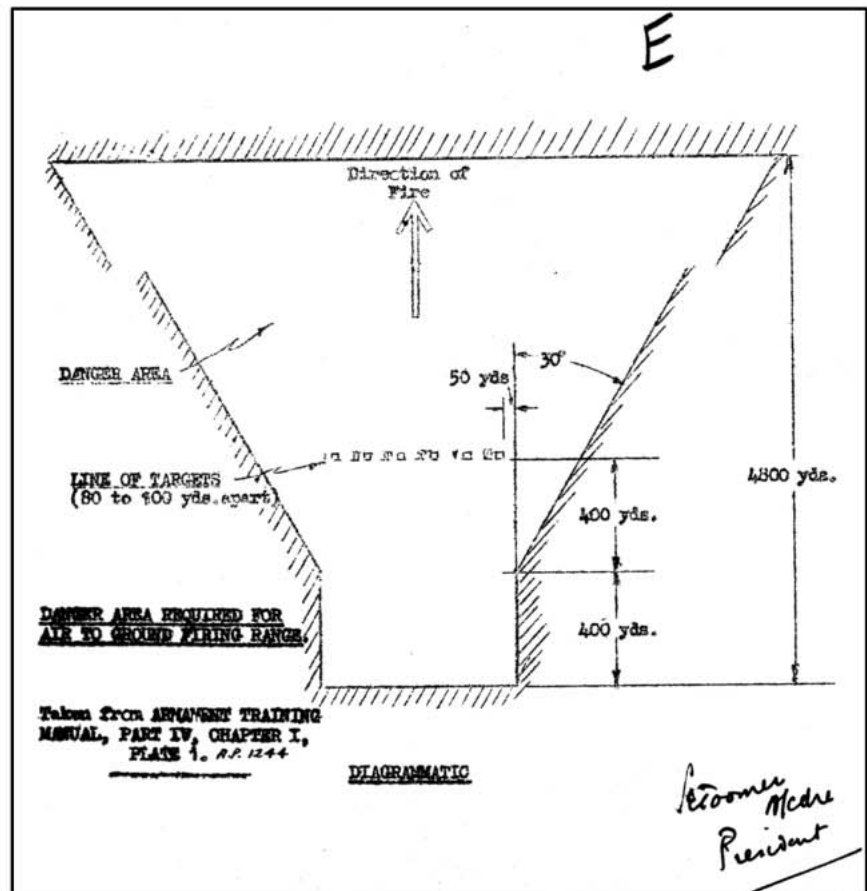
The Court found that Sergeant McLachlan was directly to blame but with the following mitigating circumstances: His limited flying experience and training in firing at ground targets. He had not flown over the target area or rehearsed the tactics. His inadequate

briefing. The weather conditions. The R/T messages. The failure to mark the spectators' enclosure in accordance with the instructions. In the Court's opinion Sergeant McLachlan was guilty of an error of judgement.

In view of the evidence the Court believed that Squadron Leader Wootten did, in fact, pass in full the disputed 'fire anyway' message for which he had to bear the responsibility and blame.

The fact that the spectators' enclosure was not enclosed by the white strips as laid down was a contributory cause, and blame for this omission was apportioned to Squadron Leader Cleaver whose responsibility this was according to the Court.

The recommendations of the Court included air and ground familiarisation with the area over which pilots would operate. All pilots should carry out non-firing training before exercises using live ammunition. Target areas should be clearly marked and the direction of attack clearly defined. A 'funnel' of white bell tents should be positioned with a white or yellow boundary line across the neck of the 'funnel' serving as an indicator before which pilots must not open fire. The spectators' enclosure should be surrounded by white ground strips. All personnel taking part should have a 'complete and satisfactory prior rehearsal'. Written instructions should clearly specify 'the respective responsibilities of the Army and RAF for all arrangements' and if for any reason these had to be changed, a fresh set of instructions should be issued instead of amendments. Finally, the Court recommended that as pilots of single-seat aircraft had difficulty in seeing 'pyrotechnic signals' immediately before attacking, the Controller should be in direct R/T contact with each aircraft. The Court of Inquiry closed on April 19, 1942 and a copy of its findings was submitted to the Air Ministry.



Document produced at the Court of Inquiry from the Armament Training Manual to illustrate the 'funnel' of bell tents deemed necessary for the safe conduct of air-to-ground exercises with spectators. (Public Record Office AIR 20/6397)

The Times reported the incident on Tuesday, April 14 under the heading 'Accident in Combined Exercises'. In essence it was a joint statement issued the previous evening by the War Office and Air Ministry briefly describing 'an unfortunate accident in which a number of soldiers, including some members of the Home Guard, were killed and others injured'. The number of killed was given as 14 with 40 to 50 injured. The cause of the accident was believed to have been due to a dive-bombing manoeuvre. The following day *The Times* published the casualty list, the number of dead had now risen to 23; and on Thursday came the report on Lieutenant Robert Cecil. By Friday the newspaper was reporting that the death toll had risen to 25 (the final figure). By now personal notices were appearing on the front page (it is only in recent years that *The Times* has carried news on this page) giving brief, three or four-line details of some of those killed at Imber. These were situated just above the 'Missing' column that listed the names of many servicemen (and occasionally women) lost in Malaya or the fall of Singapore. A short obituary of Brigadier Grant Taylor under the heading 'Fallen Officers of the Army' was also included in the issue of April 17, together with one of Captain (sic) A. J. Fitzgerald of the Royal Engineers, ending 'He was 27-years-old'.

A short news item in *The Times* of April 17, reported that 'the Prime Minister and General Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army, yesterday inspected troops in the Southern Command. They travelled back from Warminster to London last night'. This was almost certainly a reference to a visit that Churchill paid to Imber only three days after the accident to watch a similar exercise. Without doubt, the Prime Minister had been told of what had previously taken place but, characteristically, was not deterred. In a message to the editor of this magazine 'JR' (Air Commodore Ronald) recalls officiating as Controller at this demonstration which many senior officers of the three Services attended. In his own words 'The Prime Minister's display was completed without a mishap, for apart from everything else I insisted upon choosing and vetting the squadrons myself.'

In reporting the previous day's proceedings in the House of Commons, *The Times* of Wednesday, April 22, posed a question from



Three days after the awful accident Winston Churchill was due to attend a similar demonstration at the same place, obviously using the same targets. The Prime Minister was not to be put off and the display was concluded successfully. These photographs were taken by Captain Horton on April 16, 1942 — the day of the display — although unfortunately the caption does not confirm the location. It may well be at the Chilbolton range. In any case it appears that a lesson has been learned and a broad white chalk square has been placed outside the markers. (IWM)

Dr Russell Thomas, the Liberal National member for Southampton, who asked the Secretary of State for War what were the conditions and precautions taken when live ammunition was used for Army exercises. In reply, Sir James Grigg stated that an officer of Lieutenant-Colonel's rank or higher had to be satisfied 'that all reasonable precautions had been taken'. Guidance on danger zones for the weapons to be used had been given to these officers and they would also 'make

known' the areas reserved for such exercises. Dr Thomas followed this by asking the Minister if he realised that the use of live ammunition tended 'to depress rather than stimulate the morale of the soldier'. Sir James Grigg replied that his experience was the reverse. Mr Naylor (Labour, Southwark, SE) asked what was the object of using live ammunition. Was its purpose that of accustoming the men 'to being killed and wounded?' This was greeted with laughter.



Captain H. H. Balfour, Under-Secretary of State for Air, replied to a question by Sir Herbert Williams, Unionist MP for Croydon South, that directly referred to the Imber incident. Balfour's response was that a Court of Inquiry had been 'immediately convened' and its findings were expected shortly. He said he preferred not to add to what had already been published until he had all the facts. He went on to express the sympathy of the House to the relatives of those who had 'lost their lives in that tragic occurrence'. The House expressed its concurrence in its usual way with the words 'Hear, hear'.

On April 30, Dr Russell Thomas again raised the 'Imber' question by asking the Secretary of State for Air if he could make a statement regarding 'the killing of a brigadier, 22 officers and men, and the wounding of about 60 others at Imber, Salisbury Plain, on Monday, April 13'. Sir Herbert Williams asked a similar question.

In his reply, Sir Archibald Sinclair said that the exercise had been arranged to demonstrate the effectiveness of fighters attacking ground targets: dummy troops, a lorry convoy, and tanks. Five Hurricanes had successfully attacked but the sixth had fired at the spectators in mistake for the target. The casualties were 25 Army officers and other ranks killed, 68 Army officers and other ranks as well as 3 RAF officers and men injured. The findings of the Court of Inquiry, together with the recommendations of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fighter Command, had been received and were 'being considered by the Air Council in consultation with the Army Council'.



In 1950 'JR' was station commander at RAF North Weald and on October 1 Peter Dimmock of BBC Television was pictured with the CO during a break in what must have been one of the earliest outside broadcasts from an RAF station. (Crown Copyright)

This tragic story has an equally tragic postscript. At 2.30 a.m. on June 28, 1942, seventy-six days after the Imber shooting, Sergeant William McLachlan took off from Warmwell in company with Flight Sergeant Peters. McLachlan was at the controls of Hurricane IIB, BE484, and the two pilots had been ordered to carry out a night sortie against shipping in the vicinity of Cherbourg. Both

attacked at about 3.00 a.m. and a ship, thought to be a minesweeper of 1,000 tons, blew up. Sergeant McLachlan, however, was shot down and reported missing. No. 175 Squadron Operations Record Book records his loss in these words: 'We hope he will turn up but it is very doubtful. We shall miss him very much. His keenness was an inspiration to his fellow pilots'.

KILLED

5 CORPS TROOPS

BROWN, Captain Maxwell, 5 Survey Regt., Royal Artillery. Age 33. Leicester City (Gilroes) Crematorium. Panel 1.
CONNELLY, Bombardier William Gollan, 5 Survey Regt., Royal Artillery. Age 26. Dundee Eastern Necropolis, Angus. Section XE, Grave 168.
HODGE, Lieutenant William Laurence, 54 Heavy Regt., Royal Artillery. Age 27. Bournemouth North Cemetery. Row B4, Grave 93.
LIPMAN, 2nd Lieutenant Ronald Benjamin, RASC. Age 30. Willesden Jewish Cemetery, Middlesex. Section FX, Row 3, Grave 54.
KENT, Driver Charles Henry, RASC. Age 35. Exhall (St Giles) Churchyard, Bedworth, Warwickshire. Section E, Grave 42.

38 (WELSH) DIVISION

BLACKMAN, Corporal Charles Victor Norman, RAC. Age 35. East Meon (All Saints') Churchyard, Hampshire. New portion, Row 13, Grave 296.
PARRY, Fusilier Francis Verdun Llewellyn, 10th Bn., The Royal Welch Fusiliers. Age 24. Pontnewydd (Holy Trinity) Churchyard, Cwmbran, Monmouthshire. Plot J, Grave 26.
TRAVERS, Corporal Ernest, RAC. Age 23. Canterbury Cemetery, Kent. Plot XM, Grave 119.
WEST, Captain James Rowland, MC, 5th Dorset (Weymouth) Bn., Home Guard. Age 47. Weymouth Crematorium, Weymouth and Melcombe Regis. Panel in chancel.
WILLY, Captain Frederick Joseph, 3rd Dorset (Poole) Bn., Home Guard. Age 55. Branksome (St Clement) Churchyard, Poole. North of church.

HQ 5 CORPS

TAYLOR, Brigadier Robert Allan Grant, OBE, MC, The Royal Scots Fusiliers, and Commands and Staff. Age 45. Tidworth Military Cemetery, Wiltshire. Section E (Officers), Grave 60.



47 (LONDON) DIVISION

DAVIES, Major George Bevan, Mentioned in Despatches 1914-18 War, 8th Hampshire (Avon Valley) Bn., Home Guard. Age 58. Thorney Hill (All Saints') Churchyard, Sopley. Grave 119.
HAWKS, Lieutenant John Christopher, RAMC, attached 2nd Bn., London Scottish. Age 28. Southampton (Hollybrook) Cemetery. Section M12, Grave 54.
HODGE, Lance Bombardier David Carey, 117 Field Regt., Royal Artillery. Age 30. Liverpool (Allerton) Cemetery, Lancashire. Section 4, Grave 25.
McNEIL, Lance Bombardier Ivor, 140 Field Regt., Royal Artillery. Age 25. Whitby Cemetery, Yorkshire. Grave 2683.

ROBSON, 2nd Lieutenant Henry William Currie, CIE, OBE (formerly Lt-Col., Indian Army), 5th Hampshire (Winchester) Bn., Home Guard. Died of wounds, April 15, 1942. Compton (All Saints') Churchyard. East part, Grave 379.

SMITH, Sergeant Alfred George, 140 Field Regt., Royal Artillery. Age 38. Canewdon (St Nicholas) Churchyard, Essex.

TUNBRIDGE, Lieutenant George, 70th Bn., The Hampshire Regiment. Age 25. Farnborough (Victoria Road) Cemetery, Hampshire. Section L, Grave 155.

WILSON, Lieutenant Ralph Patrick Farquhar, 2nd Bn., The London Scottish, The Gordon Highlanders. Age 31. Southampton (Hollybrook) Cemetery, Hampshire. Section M12, Grave 78.

VARIOUS UNITS

FITZGERALD, Major Adrian John, Royal Engineers. Age 27. Tidworth Military Cemetery, Wiltshire. Section E (Officers), Grave 61.

HAMILTON, 2nd Lieutenant Colin George, 97 (3rd Bn., The London Scottish) HAA Regt., Royal Artillery. Age 32. Slough (Stoke Road) Cemetery, Slough, Berkshire. NC Plot, Grave 709.

MATTEY, 2nd Lieutenant Kenneth Ronald, The Welch Regiment. Age 48. Cockett (St Peter) Churchyard, Swansea. Section SE4, Grave 81.

PHILLIPS, Lieutenant Henry Ernest, 7th Wiltshire (Salisbury) Bn., Home Guard. Age 51. Downton (St Lawrence) Churchyard, Wiltshire.

POOLE, 2nd Lieutenant James Carey, 1st (Airborne) Bn., The Border Regiment. Age 21. Bradford Crematorium, Yorkshire. Panel 2.

ROBERTS, Captain George Richard Gorton, 1 Light AA Regt., Royal Artillery. Died of wounds, April 14, 1942. Age 27. Welshpool (Guilsfield) Cemetery, Montgomeryshire. Plot A, Grave 512.

AFTER THE BATTLE

WAR CRIME



THE ASCQ MASSACRE

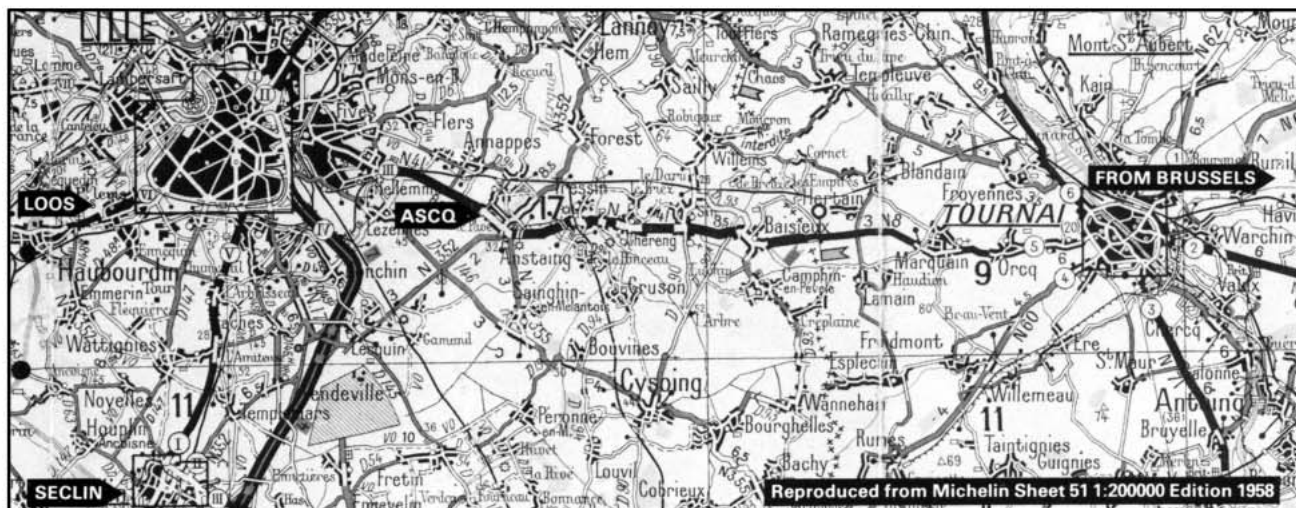
In March 1944 the 12. SS-Panzer-Division 'Hitlerjugend' was stationed in eastern Belgium in the area Turnhout – Mol – Léopoldsborg, to the east of Antwerp, not far from the Dutch border, when they received orders from the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) to proceed to Normandy in order to cover the coast between the Cherbourg Peninsula and the Seine Estuary in anticipation of the expected Allied landing which OKW forecast would come in May or June of 1944. The 'Hitlerjugend' Division entrained and set out on the morning of April 1, 1944 and their projected route was as follows: Turnhout – Herentals – Lier – Mechelin – the outskirts of Brussels – Hal – Ath – Tournai – Blandain – Baisieux – Ascq – Habourdin – Seclin – Libercourt – Douai – Arras – Amiens – Abancourt – Rouen – Oissel – Elbeuf – Glos-Montfort – Evreux – Ivry-la-Bataille. From there they were due to proceed by road.

FROM THE BOOK 'ASCQ 1944 – LA NUIT LA PLUS LONGUE'
BY DR JEAN-MARIE MOCQ TRANSLATED BY ROY M. COOKE

The SS-Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 12, the divisional reconnaissance battalion, which was quartered in Aarschot Camp between Malines and Louvain, was to lead the move of the division's 24 trains. The first train (German military train No. 649355, French No. 9872) comprised elements of the 1., 2., and 3. Kompanies together with some men of the battalion HQ, the commander on the train being SS-Obersturmführer Walter Hauck, CO of 2. Kompanie. Because of the risk of attack from members of the underground resistance movement, Hauck had instructed all the troops in his charge of the precautions to be taken during the journey. The task of guarding the train was to be undertaken by two eighteen-man squads, each reinforced during the hours of darkness by an additional eight men per squad. Protection from the air

was to be assured by means of five 20mm anti-aircraft guns on flat cars and also the machine guns on the armoured cars that were being transported on the train. The first five trucks behind the locomotive were not to be occupied by troops and half of the companies' personnel were to remain in their vehicles so as to be ready for action at a moment's notice. The remainder of the men were to travel in closed trucks. Both the Belgian guard, and two Deutsche Reichsbahn employees (who were assigned to every German troop train), had to travel in Hauck's compartment.

The journey across Belgium during daylight was carried out without incident and that evening on reaching Tournai, the last big town before the French frontier, the train crew was changed; René Dascotte taking over with his fireman Auguste Courtin and guard Walter





Lecomte. Reaching the border crossing at Baisieux, the train halted for Hauck to make enquiries as to the route ahead. He was informed by a German railway official that the Lille – Brussels express had just gone through into France and the line was therefore clear to proceed. René Dascotte, a Belgian, takes up the story:

‘We were obliged to halt for 43 minutes at the station of Baisieux, which we finally left at 11.34 p.m., and we were just about to arrive at the station at Ascq, which we would have passed through without stopping, when, as we were crossing the points that lead to some sidings, there was a violent explosion beneath my engine. At that moment the train was moving at 20 or 25 kilometres an hour [about 15 mph] at the most, so I was able to stop the train quickly by the usual means and without any violent jerking movement, with the engine coming to rest just opposite the signal box which is situated by the level crossing at Ascq. We got down from the engine straight away to find out what damage had been caused. I then noticed that the third and fourth flat trucks, which carried half-trucks in which men were seated, had come off the rails, and that the engine had suffered slight damage in several places underneath.’

As soon as the train came to a halt, the SS jumped down onto the ballast from their trucks. One witness, Madame Dewailly who lived quite near to the level crossing, ‘heard the explosion and saw a small cloud of smoke’. She added that the Germans immediately opened fire on the houses on both sides of the railway in a spontaneous and immediate reaction. However, the firing soon ceased when the Germans realised that they were not under attack and they calmed down. They went up to some people who had come to their front doors and asked them where they were and what the time was.

Meanwhile at the station of Ascq there was hardly anyone on duty as it was night time. There was one official there whose job it was to keep in touch with the stations on each side, and a signalman in his signal box whose main function was to let through any trains that were not stopping. Monsieur Elie Derache, the booking office clerk, stated that: ‘About 10.45 p.m. I heard an explosion coming from the railway in the direction of the signal box and I immediately heard the engine slow down then come to a halt. I called Monsieur Carré, the stationmaster, who lived upstairs in the main station building. I called out to him where I had left the keys of the station office, and I told him that I was going to try to find out what had happened.’

‘I then set off on foot along the railway, and found that the train had stopped several hundred metres away. The train’s engine had come to a halt a few metres beyond the signal box. At that moment, the signalman, André Ollivier, came up and we both inspected the damage: the right-hand pair of points, which had been blown up by the explosion, had derailed a flat truck from both rails and the

The signal box (poste d’aiguillage) and level crossing on the Rue Marceau (today the Rue Gaston Baratte) looking towards Tournai.

one in front and one behind each had one set of wheels off the line.

‘It must have been about 10.55 p.m. when I was able to see what had happened. It wasn’t absolutely dark as there was a little moonlight. A certain number of SS men were standing about on the trackside but they didn’t appear to be very worried about the incident. One of them made me understand that his mess tin had fallen underneath the railway wagon that had been entirely derailed. Monsieur Ollivier retrieved it and gave it back to him. The German thanked him with a smile

which I was able to see by means of the light from my acetylene lamp.

‘When I turned round, I noticed a German who was standing in a group who had a notebook in his hand, and who asked me something. This must have been an employee of the German State railways, whom I understood wanted to know where he was. I answered him: “Ascq”. As he didn’t seem to understand I wrote the name of the station in pencil on his notebook, and afterwards I returned to the station, as Ollivier had gone back to his signal box. I noticed that some employees of



Left: Elie Derache, the booking office clerk, one of the first to arrive at the scene of the explosion (below). Right: The stationmaster, Victor Carré, pictured giving evidence at the post-war war crimes trial in Lille.



This is the precise spot where the charge was set off.



SS-Obersturmführer Walter Hauck.

the SNCF (French State Railways) went to the spot where the sabotage had taken place, and that several people from nearby houses had come out on to their doorsteps to see what was going on.'

Although the SS seemed to have accepted what had happened, their commander was in a foul mood. According to the train driver, Hauck 'quickly came up to see the extent of the damage that had been caused. He appeared to be out of his mind with anger and, shouting at the top of his voice, he set off towards the rear of the train'. Convinced that gunfire had been directed against his men — his report stated that it had come from the first house to the left of the level crossing although all the French witnesses, including the train driver, confirm that there were no shots fired against the train — he gave out the following orders:

1. To SS-Oberscharführer Jura: 'Take several of your men and run at the double immediately to the scene of the explosion. Make some enquiries, and try to find and follow up any traces you can find of the terrorists'.

2. To SS-Untersturmführer Kudocke: 'I want you to explore the houses to the left of the railway line and bring to me every male civilian you can find between the ages of 17 and 50'.

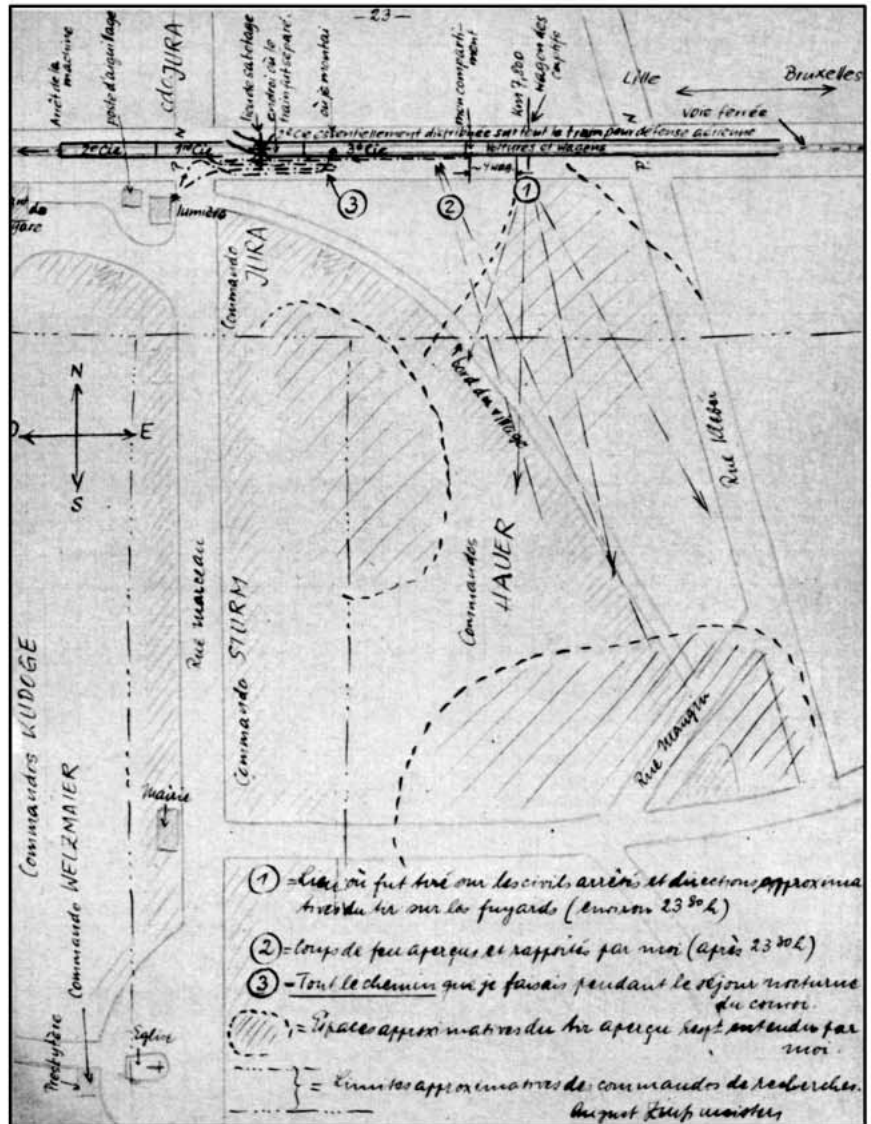
3. To SS-Untersturmführer Hauer: 'I want you to explore that part of the locality which is to the right of the railway line and arrest every male civilian between the ages of 17 and 50 and bring them back to an assembly point at the level crossing'.

4. To SS-Oberscharführer Wetzlmayer: 'I want you to search the built-up area from the level crossing by the station right up to the centre of the locality and arrest every male civilian who appears to be acting suspiciously'.

5. To SS-Oberscharführer Buss: 'I want you to protect the train with men from the 2. Kompanie and to block the way both to the left and to the right with machine guns and 20mm flak. Any civilians who try to come near the train are to be shot'.

The SS-Obersturmführer rounded off his orders by authorising each squad to make use of their weapons immediately there were any cases of resistance or bids to escape. An eyewitness is sure that he heard Hauck add the words: 'Alles Kaput' — Shoot them all!

Meanwhile Monsieur Derache had returned to the station where he found that the stationmaster was telephoning the main station in Lille and the nearby French Gendarmerie at Lannoy (to the north of Ascq), to advise them of the explosion. Monsieur Carré was in the course of suggesting to the latter that he ought to advise Monsieur Poulain, the district chief, of the situation, when, at that very instant, they heard rifle shots — just one or two and at



This plan depicting the routes taken by the SS 'snatch' squads was drawn by the Division's adjutant, SS-Oberscharführer August Zwiessmeister, on September 25, 1949 while imprisoned by the French military authorities.

intervals. Derache decided it might be better to wait a few minutes and the stationmaster asked him not to go outside. The two employees of the Deutsche Reichsbahn who had been accompanying the derailed train were in the station office with them.

As the shooting got closer and more frequent, SS-Obersturmführer Hauck arrived at the head of a detachment of young Waffen-

SS soldiers. Entering by the station platform, they came into the office, shouting insults and threats. The two German railwaymen lost no time in making themselves scarce as they must have realised or guessed what was about to happen. Hauck had hardly entered the room when he fell on Monsieur Carré and set about him with punches and kicks, knocking him to the floor.



The station — Hauck and his men arrived from the left.



Madeleine Trackoen — she lost her two brothers Jean (left) and René (right).



Hauck then turned towards Monsieur Derache, insulted him in German and, meting out more punches and kicks, grabbed a chair. Derache managed to dodge the first blow but when he saw one of the SS raising his sub-machine gun, decided to let Hauck hit him with the chair and he fell backwards to the floor, without, however, losing consciousness, although he pretended to be dead.

Before they left the station office, Hauck gave an order and some sub-machine gun rounds were fired at the two men lying on the ground. Monsieur Carré was hit in the thigh but Monsieur Derache was unwounded.

The earlier shooting had come from the three snatch squads sent out by Hauck to round up hostages as they smashed down doors and shot out windows as they began a house to house round-up. The first houses to be visited were those near the railway line. They were to provide the first victims: Lucien Albert, an ex-PoW who had been allowed by the Germans to return home through illness and who had barely been home a month, was made to leave his bed and was led as far as the

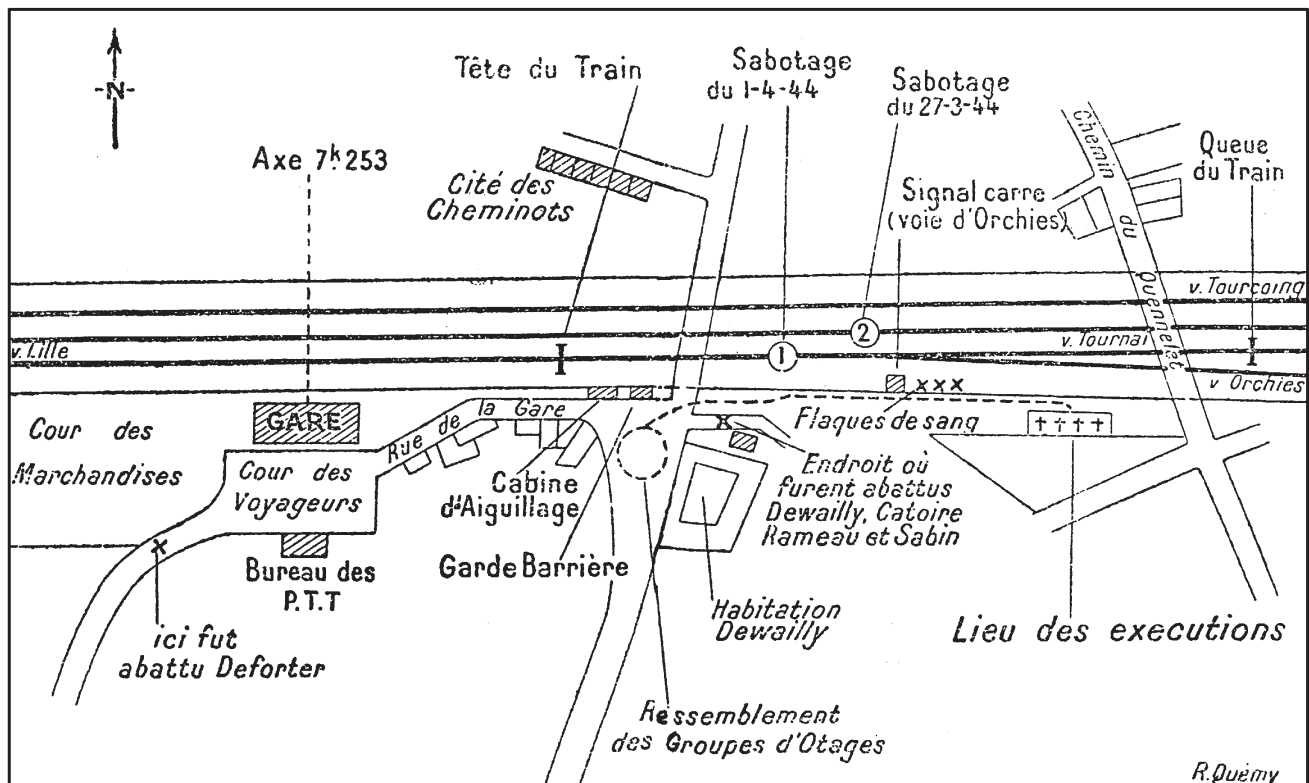
signal box. As he left he said to his wife: 'It's to repair the damage caused by the sabotage — I'll be back soon'. He never returned. Arrests were made everywhere, even women. One of them, Mademoiselle Madeleine Trackoen, living at 198 rue Marceau with her mother and her two brothers, Jean aged 20 and René 15, describes what happened:

'My mother, my two brothers and I were brought out of our house half naked by these young Waffen-SS men who led us as far as the signal box. We were told to walk with our hands above our heads. A German officer was standing at the door of the signal box and as we entered he hit us. Inside the box we soon became quite a large crowd, amongst whom I noticed especially the signalman Monsieur Ollivier and Madame Dewailly and her two daughters . . . Shortly afterwards, the German officer made us all come out and we were led along the edge of the railway where the train was standing immobilised. The SS men who were on both sides of us were hitting us with blows, and their anger was directed mainly on the men whom they made get up

into one of the trucks. An officer was standing next to the truck. Two SS men near him were loading pistols which they handed to him. The first victim, 31-year-old André Ollivier, was thrown to the ground . . . He begged for mercy, but the German was unmoved and shot him.'

Then it was the turn of the two brothers of Mademoiselle Trackoen. One young SS man, more humane than the others perhaps, taking advantage of the preoccupation of his officer, sent the women back to their homes. Madeleine added: 'My two brothers, however, never reappeared — they killed them.'

Madame Dewailly, who lived just by the railway line, had been brought out of her house together with her two daughters Gisèle and Alphonsine, and led to the place of execution where 'I saw a young German officer shoot two men from the locality that I was unable to recognize. Afterwards, one of the SS men told me I could go back home'. She and her daughters survived; her husband Léon, arrested independently, was shot near the town square.





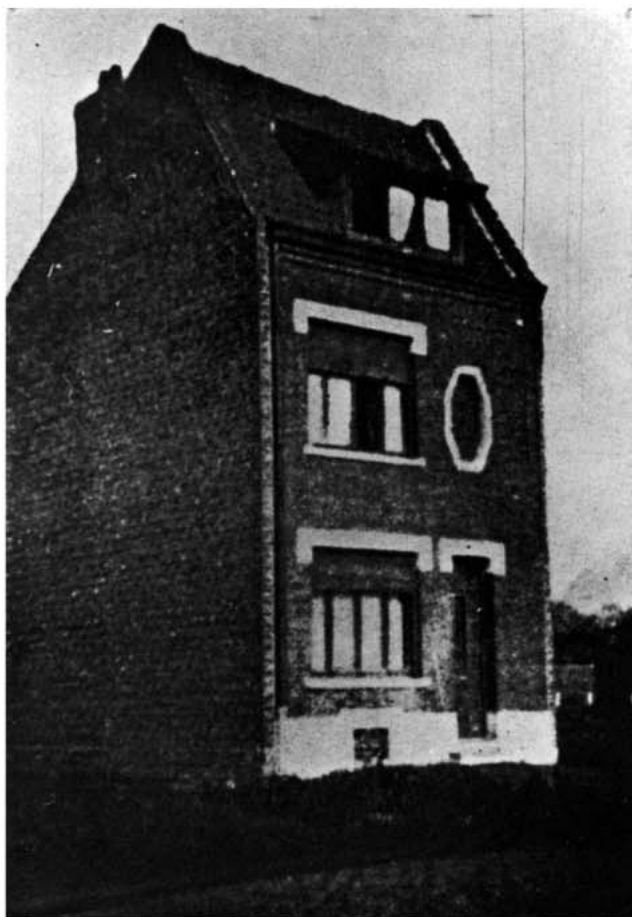
The arrested hostages were led down the rue Marceau, which was the main road of the locality, to the level crossing. From there, they were led in single file along the path at the side of the track to the place of execution, which was about 300 yards from the level crossing in the direction of Baisieux. As each man arrived at the appointed place he was shot in the back of the head. Those who did not die immediately were finished off with another round.

Those who attempted to escape only ran into further trouble. Along the side of the railway where the executions had been taking place there was some waste ground at the end

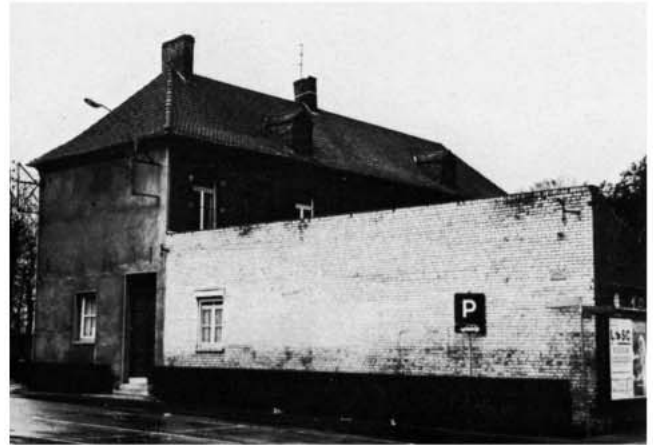
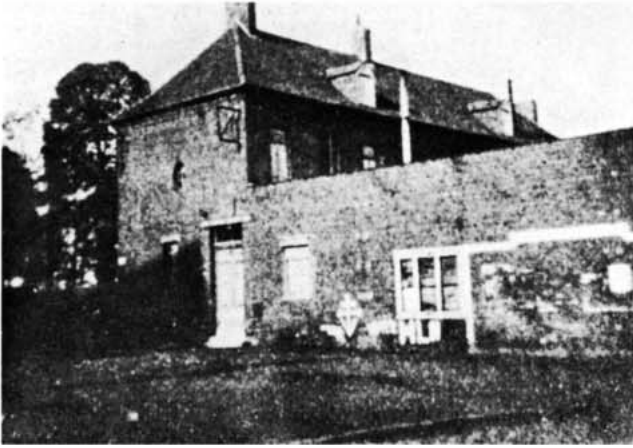
The walk to eternity. The victims were marched along the side of the track to their execution — by the white kerbstone on the left.

of which stood a house occupied by the Roseau family, some gardens and some alleyways. By crawling along it was fairly easy to reach the edge of this waste ground and thereby to make an escape by means of the alleyways. Unfortunately this had not escaped the notice of Hauck and four SS men were sent to occupy the house, with instructions to shoot down anyone who tried to escape that way. The SS soldiers faithfully fulfilled their instructions. Every time a civilian approached, getting to his feet in order to dash

away thinking he was safe, a burst of sub-machine gun fire would cut him down. If anyone who was attempting to escape was only wounded, the customary pistol shot in the back of the head completed the job. At the end of the shooting there was a heap of dead civilians all around the Roseau house — eleven bodies in all. The owner of the house has stated that when some SS men noticed a radio indoors, as the electricity was still on, they succeeded in finding some dance music and waltzed around in time to the music.



The Maison Roseau — death trap for those that tried to escape. Then it stood alone; today it is just another house in a suburban street — No. 67 Rue Mangin.



Above: The presbytere — then and now. Here Abbé Henri Gilleron (left) was gunned down; his curate, Abbé Maurice Cousin (right), was beaten to death in the street outside.



The church lay in the path of the squad led by SS-Oberscharführer Wetzlmayer whose task it was to arrest anyone acting suspiciously. Abbé Henri Gilleron, the parish priest, was in the presbytery next door with the Averlon family, refugees from the nearby suburb of Hellemmes, when the Germans burst through the garden shouting: 'Sabotage — the civilians must pay for it!' Young Claude Averlon was the first to be killed. Wetzlmayer then turned to the priest and fired two shots — a third put him out of his suffering. As Monsieur Averlon tried to escape to the garden a burst of automatic fire from SS-Rottenführer Wohlgemuth brought him down.

When the curate, Abbé Maurice Cousin, was wakened by the sound of doors being smashed in, he came out into the street. 'What is the meaning of all this violence?' a neighbour heard him ask. 'Sabotage — civilians kaput' answered an SS trooper, who attacked him, leaving him mortally wounded with broken arms and legs, his chest and head stove in.

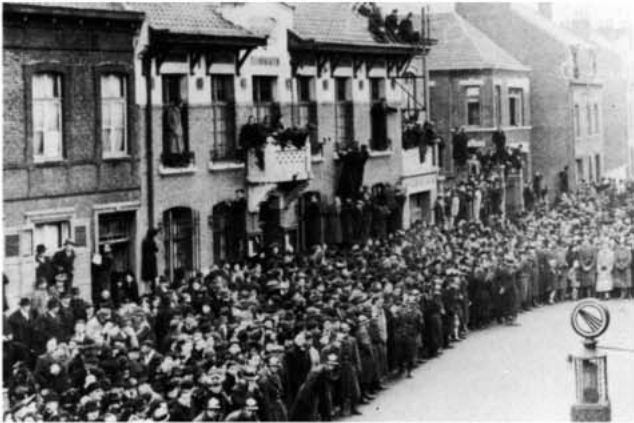
Altogether 70 people were shot beside the railway line and another 16 killed in Ascq itself.



Their graves now lie beneath the Calvary which is the centrepiece of the local cemetery where the victims are interred.



With the wall of the presbytère draped in black, the funeral cortège assembles in the Place de l'Eglise, now the Place du Général de Gaulle.



Wednesday, April 5, 1944 — three days after the massacre — upwards of 25,000 people gathered in Ascq for the funeral service. This is the crowd outside the Mairie in the Rue Marceau — renamed Gaston Baratte after one of the victims.



The procession reaches Rue de l'Abbé Lemire and the entrance to the cemetery. There a mass grave had been prepared for 49 of the dead, other burials being made in family graves according to the wishes of the next-of-kin.





No. 218 Rue Nationale, the home of Jeanne Cools. M. Louis Verdrière, the present owner, kindly showed us the vaulted cellar where the bomb was constructed. The road is now renamed in memory of the Resistance members shot for sabotaging the train, five of their number having been arrested on this street.

After an investigation by the Gestapo, apparently acting on information received from an informer who has never been identified, eight civilians — Paul Delécluse and his wife Raymonde, Henri Gallois, Eugène Mangé, Louis Marga, Raymond Monnet, Daniel Depriester and Mademoiselle Jeanne Cools — were arrested on April 21 accused of being members of the French Resistance responsible for the sabotage of the train. At the Tribunal of Feldkommandantur 678 held at the Palais de Justice in Lille on May 30, 1944, Monsieur Depriester claimed that he was working that night in the workshops at Hellemmes as a supervisor, and Jeanne Cools, Mangé, Monnet, Gallois and Marga maintained that they had gone to the cinema that evening, or else that they had remained at home. Paul Delécluse said he had been playing cards in the Café Méplont and had managed to escape the round-up of civilians together with the proprietor and André Maccou, whilst two other of his card-playing friends, Jules Francke and Louis Deffontaine had meanwhile fallen under the bullets of SS-Oberscharführer Weltzmayr just by the church.

In actual fact the Gestapo had carried out a successful investigation as those arrested were the actual people responsible for planting the bomb (except possibly for Raymond Monnet on this occasion although he was a member of the Resistance). The leader of the group was Paul Delécluse, who lived at 230 Rue Nationale, and the bomb had been prepared by Henri Gallois at the home of Jeanne Cools a few doors away at number 218. Then, together with Gallois and Louis Marga, Delécluse planted the explosive on the line while Edouard Lelong (who escaped arrest) and Eugène Mangé covered them armed with Sten guns. Daniel Depriester had blown up another steam engine at Hellemmes the same night. The Gestapo discovered twelve sub-machine guns, one revolver and 594 sticks of TNT when they raided Mademoiselle Cools' house.

The trial was widely reported in an effort to justify that the summary killing of civilians at Ascq had been warranted. It appears that the German judge had assumed that once the accused had been condemned to death they would choose to make a confession but this did not happen. While Madame Delécluse was acquitted, Jeanne Cools was sentenced to death. Her execution was then suspended in favour of deportation but, in a last-minute mix-up, she was left behind as the train left Lille for Germany.

The six men were held in the prison at Loos-lez-Lille and at 1.00 p.m. on June 7 they learned that their appeals had been dismissed and that they were to be shot at 4.00 p.m. the same afternoon. They were permitted writing materials, and the letters they left for their families still survive.

'I have just heard at this very instant that our appeals for mercy have been turned down', wrote Henri Gallois. 'Forgive me if I have to let you know this in such a brutal fashion. I want to thank you very much for all that you have done for me in the past, but I am afraid this is Fate, as I told you yesterday. It is now 2.00 p.m. and the executions are due to take place at 4.00 p.m.'

'I ask you, dearest, to have lots of courage to withstand the way things have turned out — it is Fate. I also, you see, have plenty of courage left, and I have just this moment said my Confession, and later on I will receive Holy Communion for the last time.'

'As you can see, Man proposes and the Good Lord disposes, as it says in the proverb. We had made so many plans to give a splendid welcome to the British soldiers, and they are

not now so very far from here. It looks pretty certain that we shall be the last to be shot.'

'You know very well why we are going to be shot, and you know also that I have nothing to reproach myself with.'

'I have only done my duty, my whole duty as a good Frenchman, and it is as good Frenchmen that we are all going to die . . .'

Daniel Depriester confided that: 'This letter will be my last, as I am going to be shot in an hour's time, today June 7, 1944. Just at the moment when the British troops are on their way, I won't be there to greet them. We must accept Fate. I am dying as a good Frenchman and on behalf of all the French people whom I have tried to defend against the whole world. This letter is to tell you that these words will be my very last good-byes.'

'Above all, try to be very brave, all of you, and think about me from time to time. As for flowers, I cannot tell you to come and place some on my grave as I don't even know whereabouts I am going to be shot, together with Delécluse, Gallois, Monnet, Marga and Mangé. I am thinking of all of you, and love you all.'



The six men — Paul Delécluse, Daniel Depriester, Henri Gallois, Louis Marga, Eugène Mangé and Raymond Monnet — were held in Loos prison (see map page 35) until the afternoon of June 7 — D + 1 — when they were driven south towards the isolated fort at Seclin.

To his wife Aglaure, Louis Marga wrote that 'It is with very great sorrow that I am sending you this last letter, as it is 2.00 p.m. and I am going to be shot at 4.00 p.m. I know very well, my dear wife and my dear children, that this is going to cause you a great deal of sorrow, but there is nothing I can do about it as it is the fate that has been reserved for me. Above all, my dearest wife, bring up our children the best way you can and please don't grieve too much on my account, as there have been so many who have died during this war. One great consolation I have had is to have seen all my family before my death.

'My most dear wife and my dearest children whom I shall miss so much, your father sometimes shouted at you, but he did his best to be good to you. Above all, try to help your dear mother, and be good children to her for my sake, as you have a very good mother and she does not deserve the cruel fate that has been chosen for her. I know that she will be very brave and that you will all do your best to help her in her sorrow . . .

'I must now tell you, my dearest wife, that I will die with lots of courage. Be firm but at the same time very brave . . . I am about to die as a good Frenchman . . . With great courage and firmness I should like you to come to the prison to collect my belongings . . . I am looking at all your photos and am admiring them without daring to take my eyes off them as time is getting short. Just another half-hour and it will all be over.

' . . . Time is getting shorter still, just another 20 minutes left. I am smoking a cigarette whilst I am waiting, it will perhaps be my last one . . .

Paul Delécluse penned the following to his wife: 'I have just been informed that I will be shot at 4.00 p.m. It's a bit of a blow to accept, but there is nothing I can do about it. I am leaving above all the children in your care and want you to see that they are well brought up according to my ideas. I have always loved you very much, and I think that I have made you happy — at least I have done what I could. Just now the priest is hearing the confessions of my comrades. You will, of course, know that my last thoughts will be of you and the children. All I have done is to fulfil my duty as a good Frenchman in doing what I did, and I



After a journey on which each man must have been alone with his own thoughts they were driven across the causeway straddling the dry moat which surrounds the fort, through the massive gates and into the inner courtyard.

have nothing on my conscience with which to reproach myself. I had hoped to be happy after the war, especially as it will soon be over, which is a great pity for me. As for you three, I am very pleased that you will have no worries over material matters for a little while. We are all being very brave and give many thanks to everybody for all that they have done for us.

'We all intend to die singing the Marseillaise and want to show the Germans that we also know how to die for an ideal.

'Of course, you are perfectly free to remake your life in your own way, but don't forget to speak about me to the children. Please kiss my parents for me, and your parents also. Give

my best wishes to everyone else. Give a kiss also to Lucien, Marguerite, Claude, Claudine and Joséphine, and make my apologies to anyone else if I've left them out. My best wishes also to Monsieur and Madame Debruyne and to Mademoiselle Tassart. I saw Gisèle, the mother of Fernand, also Raymond and his mother yesterday. I would have loved to have seen Mimi also, but I want to keep you in my mind's eye right up to the last minute, and my very last thoughts will be for all of you.

'Goodbye my very dear wife, Goodbye my dear little ones, always be very good and don't upset your mother too much. Your father who has loved you all very much.'

Today Fort Duhoux, although still retained by the French Army for battle training, is empty and mouldering yet the atmosphere is overbearing. In the silence the sounds of that Wednesday afternoon are all too clear . . . the squeaking of brakes as the lorry halts . . . the guttural commands . . . the slamming of doors . . . the echoing footsteps as the condemned are marched through the tunnel . . .





At the stroke of 4.00 p.m. several German army lorries emerged from the prison and turned south towards the old military fort at Seclin, about seven miles away. There, as the

condemned men were being led to the execution posts, to the background of rifles being loaded, there came the sound of the Marseillaise from the lips of those about to

die. Then, with heads held high, at the same moment that the command to fire was given and before the shots rang out, there arose the last cry: 'Vive la France!'



At the end of the tunnel the executioners were waiting. In all some seventy French patriots were shot to death here by firing squad. Except for the removal of the posts, which were

discovered when the area was liberated in September, nothing has changed . . . a sapling has matured with the passing of the years . . . yet it remains one of the most tragic places on earth.



Paul Delécluse, 33, born in Anstaing.



Daniel Depriester, 30, born in Ascq.



Henri Gallois, 29, born in Ascq.



Two mass graves were discovered behind the execution mound, one containing 21 bodies, the other 48.



Eugène Mangé, 38, born in Lille.



Louis Marga, 45, born in Louvil.



Raymond Monnet, 33, born in Fretin.



We sought out the graves of all the six: Raymond Monnet is interred at Lezennes south of Lille.



Paul Delécluse and Daniel Depriester lie side by side in Ascq.



Ascq: Henri Gallois in the family grave where his little sister Monique, aged 2, died in October 1940 'rappelée à Dieu'.



Ascq: Louis Marga 'fusillé par les Allemands' buried with his wife who died in 1977.

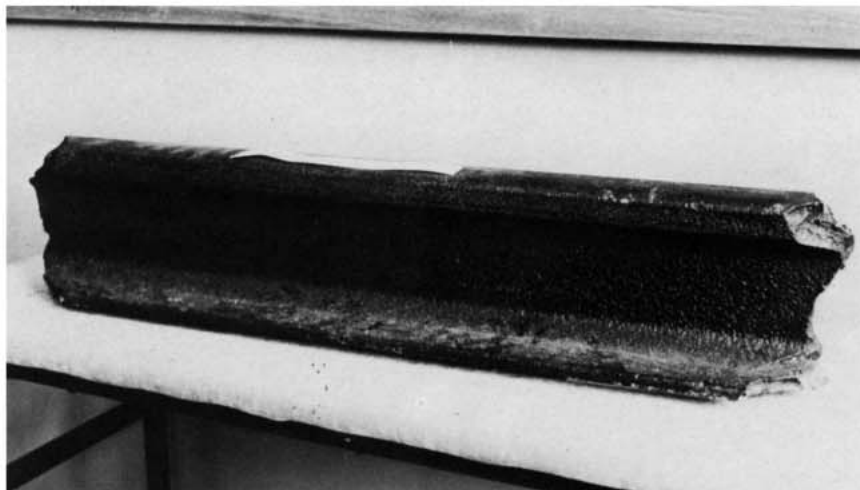


The only military grave, Eugène Mangé at La Madeleine: a Sous-Lieutenant in General de Gaulle's Forces Francaises de l'Interieur.

SS, named but not yet apprehended, were sentenced to death in their absence. While the nine convicted men were held in Loos prison, their counsel immediately lodged appeals against the sentences to the Supreme Court. The arguments put forward were that the sentence had been collectively given and that there was no real proof of complicity against any of the defendants except Hauck. Religious authorities joined in the public debate which followed the convictions, arguing the lack of proof, and on June 10, 1950 Cardinal Liénart, the Bishop of Lille, sent a letter to the French President René Coty stating that the executions would damage the image of France and render more difficult the building of a new Europe.

While the whole matter was fully aired by the media the legal arguments rumbled on, but each time a decision was about to be reached the French government fell and the new Minister of Justice appointed began the whole process again from square one. The fate of the Germans was still undecided five years later when seven widows of Ascq victims appealed directly to the French President that the sentences should not be carried out. Although the then-Minister of Justice Robert Schumann was personally opposed to the commuting of the sentences, he did not argue against President Coty's decision in July 1956 to reprieve the convicted Germans. Hauck was given 20 years hard labour and the other eight received 10 years each, which meant that with remission they were immediately released. Walter Hauck was freed in July 1957 and he returned to Germany.

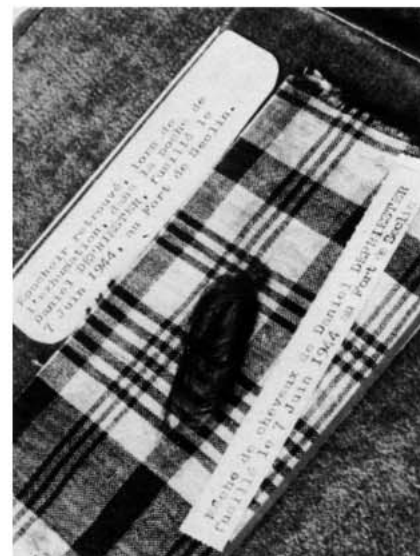
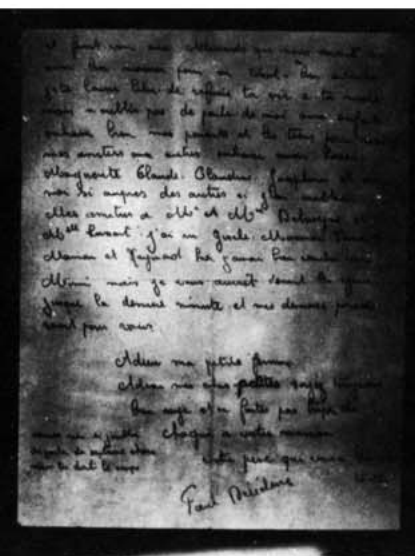
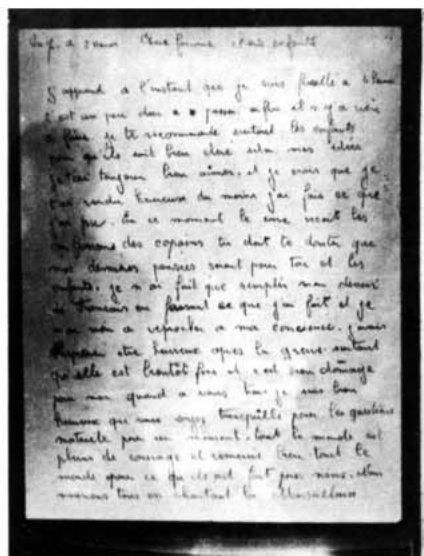
In 1966 it was disclosed by the British authorities that the numerous derailments in that area of northern France were the work of two SOE resistance networks: FARMER operating under its British-born leader Michael Trotobas, codenamed 'Michel', and MUSICIAN led by Gustave Bieler, code-named 'Guy'. Both had been dropped in France in November 1942, Michel settling in Lille and Guy further south at Saint-Quentin. As their area of operations straddled the important supply routes to the coast of north-western France, the intended invasion area, railways were to be their special targets. FARMER achieved its first successful derailment in February 1943 when forty railway trucks were destroyed on the Lens - Béthune line which was closed for two days. By mid-summer the network was causing up to twenty derailments a week while the MUSICIAN group were cutting the Lille - Saint-Quentin line about once a fortnight, one of Guy's favourite forms of sabotage being the supply of abrasive grease to his railwaymen friends.



Never can the location of a museum have been more appropriately situated as the one in Rue du Dispensaire, backing as it does onto the railway. Opened in 1984, it displays weapons, posters and other items appropriate to the occupation period together with a model of the massacre scene. Related to this are many items recovered after the event or donated in recent years: a piece of the shattered railway line, a German bugle found the next day, an epaulette ripped from a uniform, a fired cartridge belt, a shattered window from the presbytère, and spent bullets . . .



More than a thorn in the side of the Germans, Michael Trotobas was killed during a dawn raid on his lodging on November 28 — the street in Lille now being renamed Rue du Capitaine Michel. Although more arrests followed, FARMER managed to remain intact. In mid-January 1944 Gustave Bieler was arrested (he was later executed at



Most emotive of any of the exhibits: Paul Delécluse's last letter, and a lock of hair from Daniel Depriester.



On June 10, 1945 the first steps were taken to memorialise the tragedy with the renaming of the Rue Nationale 'Rue des Fusillés du 7 Juin'. Rue de la Gare was also changed to 'Rue des Martyrs'. The place where the executions had taken place was already revered by the people of Ascq and in March 1947 the decision was taken to erect a formal monument, the 'Ensemble du Souvenir' on the spot. The first stone was laid on July 13 by President de la République, Vincent Auriol. The picture above shows the area as it was in 1949, below as it is today with the hallowed ground preserved and perpetuated in the memorial inaugurated on October 9, 1955 — the year Hauck was freed.



The memorial flame is relit each year in a moving ceremony. Seen here with President François Mitterrand on April 25, 1983 is Denis Blanchatte — his father Albert was shot by the Germans in Rue Jean-Baptiste Lebas on September 1, 1944.

Flossenbürg) and the *MUSICIAN* network shattered. *FARMER* was able to carry on with the sabotage operations right up to D-Day.

In 1971 Dr Jean-Marie Mocq published his account of the massacre under the title 'Ascq 1944 — La Nuit la plus longue' in which he fully described Resistance operations in the area including the naming of the actual individuals involved in the derailment on the night of April 1/2, 1944 which led to the deaths of 86 of the townspeople. The book brings into focus the moral issues involved in the perpetration of acts of violence by the Resistance movement which inevitably led to reprisals being carried out against the local population. It is easy therefore to see how support for the Maquis and its deeds was not always enthusiastic amongst the people it purported to serve, faced with the most difficult of questions: was it all worth the terrible price exacted against the innocent?

To the people of Ascq the indelible stain of the atrocity remains an ever-present reminder of the cost of war. Many of the victims were buried in the town cemetery on April 7, 1944, forty-nine in one large plot with matching headstones. Here lie victims like Jules Franke and Louis Deffontaine, cut down by SS-Oberscharführer Weltzmayer who was never brought to justice. The graves of Jean and René Trackoen lie side by side, just a few yards from the family tomb across the path. Their father, awarded the *Medaille Militaire*, had been killed in 1943; their mother Martha joining him when she died in 1957. Here too lie four of those shot at Seclin — Delécluse, Depriester, Gallois and Marga — all in family graves. Everywhere one walks amongst the grey granite headstones the words are the same: 'Victime du Massacre d'Ascq' . . . the atmosphere is all-pervading.

Outside the cemetery wall, a large monument stands to record the dead of the Resistance, while down beside the railway line lies one of the most poignant, if not the most, of all the Second World War's memorials to war dead. Alongside a beautifully laid out paved area, a stretch of 'hallowed ground' has been marked out with granite blocks on the very edge of the railway at the place where most of the townspeople were shot, the inscription pointing out that on this very spot, the blood of so many was spilled for France.



AFTER THE BATTLE

WRECK RECOVERY

A LONELY GRAVE ON BEN MORE ASSYNT

BY DAVID J. SMITH

The Operations Record Book of No. 19 Operational Training Unit, Kinloss, contains the following brief entry for April 13, 1941: 'Anson N9857 carrying out a cross-country flight was reported missing and, despite an extensive search, no trace has been found of this aircraft'. Six weeks later, the wreck was discovered by chance and the crew were buried in the only official war grave on high ground in the United Kingdom. From various sources it has been possible to piece together some of the background to another of World War II's minor mysteries.

The training of night bomber crews at Kinloss continued and the unit's Operations Record Book makes no further mention of the disappearance until May 26, 1941 when 'Wing Commander D. I. P. McNair, the Reverend C. A. Fisk, Squadron Leader J. W. B. Richardson and Flying Officer E. H. Gordon departed by road on temporary duty to Inchnadampf, a message having been received the previous day that a shepherd had found Anson N9857, which had been missing since April 13, on Ben More Assynt, Sutherland, at a height of 2,200 feet'.

The log entry continues: 'After considerable difficulty and being led by two volunteer guides, party located the aircraft which was a total wreck. Owing to six weeks having elapsed since the aircraft was lost and the subsequent advanced state of decomposition of the bodies of the crew, it was considered advisable to bury them on the scene of the accident, particularly in view of the extreme difficulty which would have been experienced in carrying the bodies down the mountainside. A cairn of peat surmounted by large boulders was then erected over the graves'.

There was no Mountain Rescue Service in existence at that time and it would be 1943 before anything official was organised (see *After the Battle* No. 22), hence the decision to bury the crew on the spot. Perhaps there was some subsequent criticism as it seems thereafter to have become official policy to recover bodies, no matter what the circum-

stances. A former Mountain Rescue Team member from that time told me that their primary job was the removal of corpses for burial, any rescues of injured aircrew being considered a bonus as so few survived collisions with mountains.

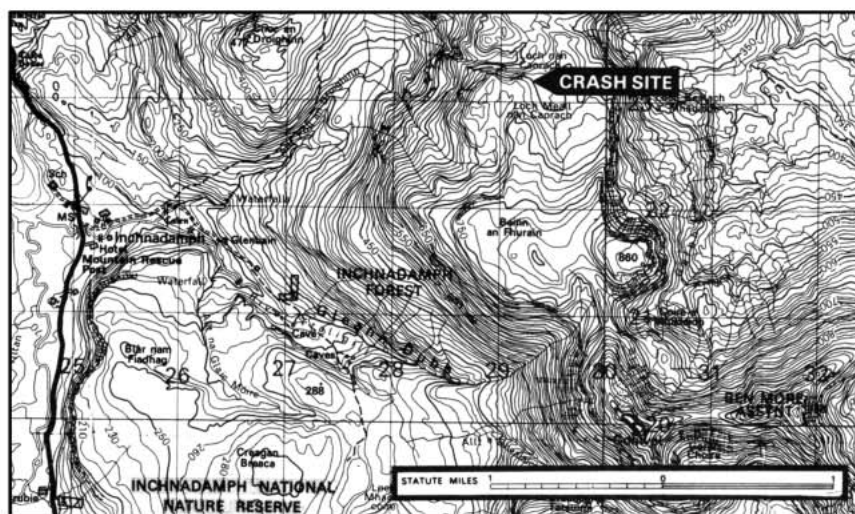
A year later, a Whitley from No. 19 OTU was found in the Grampian mountains almost three months after failing to return from a night flying exercise, and an unofficial team from RAF Montrose had the unpleasant task of carrying the seven bodies down a 3,000-foot mountain. From 1943, Kinloss had its own team which was kept busy dealing with the many aircraft which came to grief in the Eastern Highlands.

The entry in the Commonwealth War Graves Register of Burials in Northern Scotland shows that the lonely grave of the

Anson crew was not forgotten. The circumstances are described thus:

'Inchnadampf is a hamlet in south-west Sutherland at the south-eastern end of Loch Assynt. Lying 33 miles west-north-west of Lairg railway station, it has an inn and is a favourite haunt of anglers.

'In early April 1941 an Anson bomber crashed 2,300 feet above sea level on Ben More, about five miles from Inchnadampf. The wrecked plane and the bodies of the crew, six airmen of the Royal Air Force, were not discovered until May 25th, and owing to the inaccessibility of the place and the weather conditions prevailing at the time it was necessary to bury the six bodies at the scene of the crash



The most isolated war grave in Britain — that of six crewmen of an Anson lost in north-west Scotland.



The simple memorial recently renewed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in Inchnadamph Old Churchyard.

'The grave was marked and protected by a cairn, but its position makes permanent maintenance and the erection of a headstone impracticable. These airmen are therefore commemorated by a wall memorial panel at the entrance to Inchnadamph (or Kirtan) Old Churchyard, Assynt. A flower trough beneath the panel forms part of the memorial, and a quantity of the soil from the actual grave has been used in this trough, which is protected by a small fence and gate.'

The crew consisted of the pilot, Flying Officer James Henry Steyn, 42275, DFC, a 23-year-old South African from Johannesburg; observer, Pilot Officer William Edward Drew, 45356, age 28, from Barrow-in-Furness; wireless operator, Flight Sergeant Thomas Brendon Kenny, 551620, age 20, from Barnsley, Yorkshire; wireless operator/air gunner, Sergeant Jack Emery, 976995, age 20, of Trowbridge, Wiltshire; an observer under training, Sergeant Charles McPherson Mitchell, 992122, age 31, from Aberdeen, and wireless operator/air gunner under training, Sergeant Harold Arthur Tompsett, 931417, age 20, of Croydon, Surrey.

Steyn, Drew and Kenny were all 'screened', i.e. they had completed a tour of operations and were now temporarily posted to an OTU as instructors to pass on the benefit of their experience. Flying Officer Steyn had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross after a tour with No. 10 Squadron at Leeming in Yorkshire. He had joined the squadron on August 3, 1940 direct from a course at No. 10 OTU at Abingdon, Oxfordshire. As was customary, he flew his initial trips as second pilot, the first being in Whitley P4994 with Flying Officer Warren as captain. The target was the Zeiss works at Jena but so much difficulty was experienced in finding it that the bombs were dropped on an aerodrome near Salfeld. Two nights later in P4966 they made a successful attack on an aluminium works at Rheinfelden.

Milan was the target on two occasions later

in August, No. 10 Squadron using advanced bases at Abingdon and Harwell to gain the necessary endurance to reach this distant city. Steyn accompanied Warren to Berlin on the night of September 3/4, 1940 but they were unable to locate the primary target, a transformer station, owing to intense darkness and haze, so dropped the bombs on a railway line instead. They went back to Berlin on September 6/7 and bombed an oil depot. Such was the lack of navigational aids that raids in those days were haphazard affairs but they

undoubtedly caused the enemy a lot of embarrassment at a time when Britain was supposed to be on her knees!

After nine operations as second pilot, Steyn was given his own crew and flew his first operation as captain on September 14/15, the objective being Antwerp docks. He normally took Whitley P5055 and during September attacks were made on the *Bismarck* at Hamburg, marshalling yards at Soest, an aluminium works at Lauta and a Berlin power station. Over Berlin on the latter operation,



When the Anson came into service in 1936, its notable feature was its hand-cranked retractable undercarriage — the first of its kind in the RAF. It lies near the 350 hp Armstrong Siddeley Cheetah port engine — in remarkable condition after forty-four years' exposure to the elements.



Buried in their lonely grave 44 years ago, this unique tribute has remained untouched and forgotten by all but a few — Dave Smith visited the site in August 1984. In June 1985, air cadets from No. 2489 (Bridge of Don) Squadron, under the command of Flight Lieutenant Niall Aslen, set out to refurbish the grave, rebuild the cairn topped by a nine-foot cross and have it dedicated by the Reverend Fred Hurst of the Church of Scotland at Lochinver. Cadet Niall Cumming adds the finishing touches.

Steyn had engine trouble at 9,000 feet, lost 2,000 feet but was able to salvo the bombs and bring P5055 back to England.

Targets in October included Stettin, an aircraft component factory at Stuttgart, and on two occasions a synthetic oil plant at Magdeburg. The first time over Magdeburg there was complete cloud cover so the bombs were brought back to base. On the second attempt the weather was bad again and, unable to find the target, the bombs were released over the Friesian Islands. At that point in the war the enemy had few night fighters and the flak had yet to reach its later concentration and accuracy. The weather was the main hazard and the slow and heavy Whitley was usually incapable of climbing over it.

On November 13/14, 1940, they went to the synthetic oil plant at Merseburg, a dreaded name to Eighth Air Force bomber crews far in the future, but were unable to locate the target after an extensive search. After these deep penetration trips, a short run to the docks at Le Havre was no doubt a relief. However, on the night of December 7/8, P5055 was struck by lightning just after bombing Düsseldorf. Flying Officer Steyn was temporarily blinded and some of the instruments and the trailing aerial were damaged.

Two raids on Mannheim in Whitley T4265 were made in December, after which the crew seem to have been sent on leave. Steyn's final operations came on January 4/5 and January 10/11, 1941, the targets being Hipper-class

cruisers in Brest docks. The port engine failed at 100 feet on take-off during the first one but it was successfully restarted and they pressed on to France. On the return journey the Whitley was caught up in a Luftwaffe raid on Bristol and was fired on by the defences.

Flying Officer Steyn was now posted to No. 10 OTU at Abingdon and later transferred to Kinloss, arriving there on March 15, 1941. On the 29th of that month, he left for London to receive his Distinguished Flying Cross from the King at a Buckingham Palace investiture. Following this, he attended a short course at Farnborough on the use of oxygen and eventually returned to Scotland on April 10, three days before his death. Like so many Bomber Command aircrew he had survived a tour of operations only to perish in a training accident.

Inchnadumph Old Churchyard lies just off the road and the memorial to the Anson crew, recently renewed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, is the first thing one sees as one approaches. Ben More Assynt rises to the south-east of the village and very forbidding it looked too when we set out in August 1984. The summit was shrouded in cloud but the weather forecast was good and it lifted by the time we reached the crash site.

This is a deer-stalking district so access may be restricted at certain times of the year. There is, however, one benefit from this; a new path has been constructed which passes within a mile of the crash and thus avoids much of the hard going which previous wreck-hunters (only a handful, I suspect) have experienced. It is still a nine-mile round trip, remember, so all the usual precautions to be found in hill-walking guides must be observed. The variety of wildlife is amazing, ranging from deer to huge mountain hares, but we never saw another human being all day, so beware!

The Anson wreck lies in a gently sloping boggy area near a fast-flowing stream which forms an attractive waterfall nearby. In good weather it would be possible to make a crash-landing here in an emergency and probably walk away from it, yet it is difficult to reconstruct just how the aircraft crashed, the spread of wreckage suggesting that it perhaps hit one of the surrounding outcrops of rock.





Although the memorial retains the original wooden cross, six additional markers were added. Here Corporal Garry Gillespie steps forward to place his cross. The other boys on the

operation were Cadets James Alexander, Niall Cumming, Kevin Gauld, Paul Innes, Peter Mayne, Stewart Melvin, Barry Woods, Corporal Stephen Smith and Sergeant Jason Bowie.

The cairn of rocks over the grave is in the centre of the scattered remains of the aircraft and the intact gun turret has been placed next to it. A small metal plaque records the names of the crew in alphabetical order, with the inscription 'Buried here 13th April 1941' which is not strictly true, of course. A small wooden cross, now very weathered, has also been placed by the cairn.

Apart from the turret, the largest components are the engines, with the bent propellers still attached, and the retracted undercarriage. The Anson Mk I was made from metal tubing with a fabric covering and sections of this structure are littered around. They were probably chopped up by the salvage crew to render the wreckage less conspicuous and prevent false alarms if it were sighted from the air in the future. There seems to have been no attempt at burying the debris and little of any significance appears to have been recovered at the time.

The intact tail wheel leg is another instantly recognisable item, as are the lengths of bicycle-type chain used for the manual retraction of the undercarriage. Light sheet metal panels have been blown some distance by strong winds and some lie in the bed of the stream. Virtually all the myriad parts which made up an aircraft of that era can be found lying in the peat but I would emphasise that this is not a wreck from which one can take 'souvenirs' — it seems too much like grave robbing.

Anson N9857 was little more than a year old when it crashed, having been allotted originally to No. 14 Flying Training School at Kinloss early in 1940. When this unit left for Cranfield in April 1940 it was transferred to No. 19 OTU. It was observed that, despite being parked out in the open for most of their lives, the serviceability of these aircraft was good. They were flown only by screened pilots. Of the Whitneys that Steyn flew on operations, both P4966 and T4265 later ditched in the North Sea, P4994 was destroyed in a flying

accident and P5055 failed to return from a raid on June 28, 1941.

Somewhat subdued, we added a few pieces of wreckage to those already placed on the cairn and moved to a respectful distance to eat our sandwiches. It is, as my friend John Finch-Davies remarked, as fine a place as any to be buried, and no cemetery could ever have so grand a setting. Turning our backs on this sad and desolate spot which the hand of war had so briefly touched, we trudged thoughtfully back down the mountain.

As a footnote, one should mention a similar accident which took place on January 11, 1945 in the Cairngorm mountains. Oxford PH311 of No. 11 (Czech) Squadron at Tain in north-east Scotland disappeared whilst flying back

to base from south of the border. On August 19 the wreck and the bodies of four Czech and one British officer were discovered by two climbers on the North Top of Bheinn A'Bhuird. RAF Dyce and an army mule team were detailed to provide a recovery party but, because of the physical state of the bodies, they were unable to bring them down on the mules and the leader of the party requested permission to bury them on site. This was refused and after five days' unpleasant work they were brought down the mountain. Possibly these strenuous efforts had political overtones as there is some correspondence in official files, including a letter of thanks from the Czech authorities to the NCO who led the recovery squad.



Relatives of the dead crew joined RAF personnel in the three-hour walk from the nearest road to the new cairn for the dedication and wreath-laying ceremony.

